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HEADLINE	01/04 Children 69% Covid cases major counties
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/children-make-up-over-two-thirds-of-covid-19-cases-in-king-pierce-and-snohomish-counties

SEATTLE — Some parents are on edge, as thousands of children are heading back to their classrooms without COVID-19 vaccinations.

The omicron variant is sending infection numbers right through the roof, both in Washington State and around the country.

In King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties, children - from infants up to 19-year-olds, make up 69 percent of all recent cases of COVID-19.

At the Kraken Community Ice Plex, there's an effort by Virginia Mason Franciscan Health and Primera Health to get more kids to roll up their sleeves, and parents boosted— in the age of omicron.

11-year-old Braddack Palmer was there for his second dose, and his mom got boosted too.

Braddack and his brother started online school when the delta variant was surging. With omicron here too, they're still staying home.

"We're doing our part and we hope others will do the same," said Mom Karissa Palmer. "It's scary, not knowing what it does and what the side effects are. Really the unknown, that's what scary."

Right now—vaccination rates for young kids are stunningly low in Washington State.

The Washington State Health Department said only 20 percent of kids aged 5-11 are fully vaccinated.

In King County, 36 percent percent in that age group are fully vaccinated.

In Pierce County it's even lower: only 11 percent of kids 5-11 have their full series.

Seattle Children's hospital said they are seeing a "steep increase" of patients in their COVID isolation unit in the past week and a half compared to previous weeks.

Seattle Children's said the severity of COVID illness that they are seeing seems to be lower than with the Delta variant.

Infectious diseases nurse practitioner Karen Dykes said many parents are doing the, 'wait and see' approach with kids and vaccines, but that's too risky with omicron.

"We are seeing across the nation with the omicron surge more kids are ending up in the hospital. Still not a huge percentage, but we're still seeing more kids in hospitals than previous surges," said Dykes.

She said vaccines would protect children from getting dangerously ill, even if the omicron variant seems less severe than the delta variant.

"We still know it's protective in keeping you from getting really sick, but still the goal with vaccination is that you don't get a disease and you don't die of a disease," said Dykes.

The last thing some parents want to see is a rerun of 2020 schooling.

"I think everybody needs to do their part to get vaccinated otherwise we're just in a circle, getting sick and so on and mutations.

As for Braddack, he's ready for his boost--but with a condition.

"Only for a piece of cake," said Braddack.

HEADLINE	01/04 Seattle University virtual learning thru Jan.
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/seattle-university-will-stay-in-virtual-learning-through-january
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Students, faculty and staff at Seattle University will get to stay home a little longer.</p> <p>The university announced Tuesday it was extending virtual classes through Jan. 30, 2022.</p> <p>This comes as the omicron variant continues to spread throughout the city, state and country.</p> <p>Seattle University said it would initially start this semester virtual, however, has since changed its mind.</p> <p>"Current projections suggest that the Omicron-driven wave will continue to grow rapidly before cresting over the next few weeks," Seattle University President Eduardo Penalver said in a statement. "While early research continues to indicate that the variant is less severe and results in milder illness compared to earlier variants, especially among vaccinated people, there is still a great deal of uncertainty."</p> <p>There are still labs being held in person, though you should receive a note from your professor for additional guidance.</p> <p>Residence halls, dining services, the library and other buildings will remain open.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Mexico infections rise at tourism centers
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-travel-health-lifestyle-caribbean-215b060fc3f3089a9d46abc5559d436e
GIST	<p>LA PAZ, Mexico (AP) — COVID-19 infections are rising across Mexico, especially in two states home to major tourism destinations on the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean that were busy during the holiday season.</p> <p>According to data from the federal government, Quintana Roo, where tourists flock to Cancun, Tulum and other spots along the Mayan Riviera, and Baja California Sur, which draws beachgoers to the twin Pacific resorts that make up Los Cabos, are both experiencing some of their highest infection totals since the start of the pandemic.</p> <p>During the holidays, the waterfront and beaches in La Paz, the capital of Baja California Sur perched on the Sea of Cortez, were packed with tourists. Early in the pandemic they had been closed.</p> <p>Farther south in Los Cabos, hotels were at 75% of their capacity during the week of Christmas, according to the federal Tourism ministry.</p> <p>"In December, January, tourism took off," said Israel Coto, manager of a hotel-restaurant in La Ventana, about 20 miles south of La Paz. "People are tired of the confinement."</p> <p>Infections shot up too. Baja California Sur saw 700 new infections Dec. 29, compared to a previous high in July of fewer than 600.</p> <p>On the opposite coast, Quintana Roo, went from 27 cases Dec. 20 to 484 eight days later, though that remained below its single-day high of 574 in August.</p> <p>"This new variant (omicron) is very contagious, but fortunately it is not requiring hospitalization, nor do we have cases of rising deaths," President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Tuesday.</p> <p>Mexico experienced its worst moments of the pandemic a year earlier when hospitals were overwhelmed and test-confirmed COVID-19 deaths were above 1,400 daily. The real numbers were surely even higher because of limited testing.</p>

However, the summer wave that peaked in August with more than 25,000 new infections in a single day was even higher.

At no time did Mexico close its borders or require negative test results for arriving tourists. Airports did require travelers to fill out a health form and many for a time were checking temperatures. Only at the shared border with the United States was cross-border traffic limited to the essential until November.

Coto considered the return of tourists to the beaches positive, but recognized there was concern over the rise in infections.

“There’s a little nervousness,” he said. “The vaccine helped a little to give some certainty, but even so.”

Daniela Yepiz, a stylist in La Paz, said concern seemed to grow after infections rose in the days after Christmas, citing a lot of cancelations. “The people stopped coming,” she said.

Health Secretary Jorge Alcocer said, recent studies appear to indicate that even though there are new variants, the prevalence of vaccines could begin to mitigate the most serious effects of the virus. He emphasized that that was still just a hypothesis.

Mexico has vaccinated 88% of adults and has started giving a third dose to the elderly, health workers. Teachers will begin receiving the booster in the coming days.

“We are not as worried as before because most people are vaccinated,” said Arturo González Ledesma a doctor at Ajusco Medio Hospital in Mexico City, which has specialized in COVID-19 patients since the start of the pandemic. “Only in the unvaccinated do you see the face of terror.”

González encouraged people to remain careful. “We shouldn’t say we’re going to come out of it yet.”

The increase in infections led a dozen states of Mexico’s 32 to delay the return to classes after the holidays. While many of the country’s students returned to school Monday, those other states, including Quintana Roo and Baja California Sur, delayed the start to Jan. 17.

Meanwhile, local governments are once again stepping up their testing efforts. In La Paz this week, long lines were visible outside COVID-19 testing centers. Mexico City announced Tuesday that it was expanding testing hours at health centers and re-opening testing kiosks around the city in an effort to double capacity to about 23,400 tests daily.

Major population centers including Mexico state, which contains many of the capital’s suburbs, as well as Guadalajara and Monterrey are also seeing rising infections. Mexico is nearing 300,000 test-confirmed COVID-19 deaths, though the real number of COVID-19 deaths is closer to 450,000, according to the government.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Health expert blasts TSA checkpoints
SOURCE	https://theintercept.com/2022/01/04/ignoring-omicron-risk-tsa-still-requires-travelers-remove-masks-airport-checkpoints/
GIST	<p>ABOUT TWO MILLION times a day, every day for the past two weeks, a passenger in an American airport has reached the front of a line for pre-flight screening by the Transportation Security Administration and handed an identification card to an officer.</p> <p>Almost all of those travelers were wearing masks over their mouth and nose — as is required by law during the pandemic, to cut down on the airborne transmission of the coronavirus in transport hubs — but each of them was asked to briefly remove or lower their mask so the officer could compare their face to the photo on their ID.</p>

Then, seconds later, the process was repeated as the next traveler stepped forward and removed their mask, standing almost exactly where the person ahead of them had stood, unmasked, for a brief conversation with the officer.

Before the emergence of the more infectious omicron variant of the coronavirus, just in time for the holiday travel season, TSA checkpoints were not considered particularly risky by public health experts. But the ease with which omicron spreads between unmasked people sharing the same air could change that, in a hurry.

Omicron “is so infectious, it almost needs just a whiff of infected breath and you could get infected,” immunologist and respiratory physician Peter Openshaw [told BBC News](#) on Friday.

Last month, researchers at the University of Hong Kong reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that the omicron variant had spread from one fully vaccinated traveler to another across the hallway of a quarantine hotel, even though the travelers never interacted and only briefly opened their doors to retrieve meals.

“I agree that with such highly transmissible viruses, the TSA policy isn’t ideal,” Eric Topol, a professor of molecular medicine at Scripps Research, told me in an email. “It’s a very brief period of lowering a mask, but in a crowded indoor environment usually without good ventilation and air filtration.”

“The challenge is, you do need some sort of alternative; but yes, from a public health, infectious disease transmission perspective, it makes me uncomfortable,” said Céline Gounder, an infectious disease specialist who advised the Biden transition team on the pandemic. “I just flew last weekend and standing in that TSA line being asked to take off my mask, I definitely thought about that.”

Lawrence Gostin, director of the O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law at Georgetown University, pointed out that the current process is also dangerous for TSA officers, many of whom are wearing loose-fitting surgical masks, which might not protect them sufficiently against the omicron variant. “TSA personnel are at significant risk, and that risk is only magnified by passengers taking down their masks for identification,” Gostin wrote in an email. “I would recommend against this high risk practice. If it were possible to dispense entirely with mask lowering, that would be ideal. If it could be done in a well ventilated or even outdoor space, it would even be safer.”

Moving the TSA checkpoints from inside airports to outside “is certainly one possibility, if the airports and TSA have the bandwidth to do that,” Gounder said. “I know the administration is super worried about doing anything that will make traveling even harder than it currently is, anything that would result in longer lines or anything like that.”

Gounder, who hosted a podcast about the pandemic in 2020 with Ron Klain, the current White House chief of staff, added that any alternative ways to identify people would need to strike “a balance between privacy and efficiency.”

“If you had retinal scans, for example, that would be a much more efficient way to do this, and you wouldn’t have people needing to take off their masks,” she noted, but that might be a tough sell to privacy advocates, with well-founded concerns, not to mention conspiracy theorists convinced that vaccines contain tracking devices.

There is a privately run service, Clear, that already operates identity verification lanes at some airports for paying customers who can skip the TSA checkpoints and have their identities verified by fingerprint and eye scans without removing their masks.

Sonny Lorrius, a TSA spokesperson, declined to answer emailed questions about whether the agency was concerned about the current screening process giving the virus a chance to spread between temporarily unmasked travelers indoors, or whether any thought had been given to moving the document checkpoints outside airport doors.

	<p>“TSA remains concerned about the increased COVID infections,” Lorrius wrote in an emailed statement, “and face masks, social distancing and checkpoint modifications that seek to reduce physical contact all remain in place for the health and safety of TSA employees and passengers.”</p> <p>Lorrius added that TSA employees and travelers should consult the CDC for advice on how to remain safe while traveling. The CDC did not respond to repeated requests to comment on the TSA policy of having passengers remove their masks during the screening process.</p> <p>Perhaps because the TSA was set up, after 9/11, to stop terrorists from boarding airplanes, not viruses, it has seemed slow to embrace the public health responsibilities thrust upon it by the Biden administration.</p> <p>In an October letter to TSA administrator David Pekoske, Rep. Bennie Thompson, the Mississippi Democrat who chairs the Homeland Security Committee, and Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman, the New Jersey Democrat who chairs the subcommittee on transportation, asked why the TSA was not robustly enforcing the federal requirement to wear masks in transportation settings.</p> <p>“With incidents of unruly passengers at airport checkpoints and aboard planes at historic highs, we are concerned that TSA is not fully utilizing its authorities to deter this reckless and dangerous behavior,” Thompson and Coleman wrote. “Between February 2, 2021, and September 13, 2021, TSA received 4,102 reports of mask-related incidents. During that time it assessed a total of only \$2,350 in civil penalties against ten passengers and simply issued warnings to more than 2,000 passengers. In contrast, the Federal Aviation Administration has fielded complaints about more than 3,500 mask-related incidents since the start of the year and has issued over \$1 million in proposed fines against disruptive passengers.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Mayo Clinic fires 700 unvaxxed workers
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mayo-clinic-fires-700-unvaccinated-employees/
GIST	<p><i>Rochester, Minnesota</i> — Mayo Clinic fired 700 employees Tuesday who didn't comply with its policy to get vaccinated against COVID-19 by Monday, CBS Minnesota reports.</p> <p>The dismissed employees make up about 1% of Mayo's 73,000 workforce.</p> <p>Officials say while it's sad to lose valuable employees, it's essential to keep patients, the workforce, visitors and communities safe.</p> <p>Employees released Tuesday can return to Mayo Clinic for future job openings if they get vaccinated.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Covid-19 may lead to autoimmune issues
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2022-01-04/months-after-covid-19-infection-body-may-attack-itself-study-says
GIST	<p>Those who recover from even mild cases of COVID-19 often possess elevated autoantibody levels that may cause the body to mistakenly attack itself months after infection, a new study suggests.</p> <p>The autoimmune phenomena was identified in a study involving health care workers who had contracted the coronavirus early on in the pandemic, before vaccines became widely available. The study, published in the the Journal of Translational Medicine, found that among 177 health care workers who had recovered from COVID-19, all had persistent autoantibodies months after infection, including some which can cause injury to organs and tissues.</p> <p>The study builds on existing research that identifies persistent autoimmunity after COVID-19 infection, revealing sex-specific variations. While males carry the risk of autoimmune activation following</p>

symptomatic COVID-19 infection, females carry the risk of autoimmune activation following asymptomatic coronavirus exposure, the study found.

According to the study, the findings contribute to a growing body of evidence related to long COVID, a range of ongoing health problems people report experiencing after contracting the virus that causes COVID-19.

The conversation surrounding long-term COVID-19 symptoms has gained traction in recent weeks, as infection rates have soared amid the omicron variant and as some have grappled with the reality that infection may be inevitable. But very little remains understood about long COVID, experts say. And the new variant, although research shows it appears milder than other variants, still poses a risk of long-term symptoms.

Leading infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci said during a December press briefing that, while information on omicron and long COVID remains limited, he “would not expect it’s going to be any different than we have with delta.”

“But we’ll have to wait to see until we get more experience,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Pierce Co. cases, hospitalizations ‘tripled’
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article257044992.html
GIST	<p>Pierce County reported 6,271 new COVID-19 cases for Dec. 26-Jan. 4 and eight new deaths.</p> <p>The Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, in its Tuesday report, noted that the county’s case rates and hospitalizations “have tripled in recent weeks.”</p> <p>As of Jan. 4, 68.3 percent of the people who died of COVID in the county had underlying health conditions, according to the health department’s dashboard.</p> <p>The county’s totals are 112,518 cases and 977 deaths since the first confirmed coronavirus case was reported in March 2020.</p> <p>Pierce County’s 14-day case rate per 100,000 was 841.6 for Dec. 12-25, 114 percent higher than the previous 2-week period.</p> <p>The 7-day rate of hospitalizations per 100,000 is at 16 for Dec. 19-25, 78 percent higher than the previously reported 7-day period.</p> <p>According to state Department of Health totals reported Monday, which tend to run higher than the county numbers, Pierce County’s rate of cases and hospitalizations ranked the highest in the state.</p> <p>From February to November, 43,626 of Pierce County’s cases involved unvaccinated people, according to the state Department of Health in its vaccine data report issued Dec. 29.</p> <p>That compares with 9,431 cases involving those vaccinated during the same period, according to the state DOH.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 SPS: 4% positivity rate staff, students
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/education/seattle-public-schools-reports-4-positivity-rate-in-rapid-covid-19-tests-of-staff-and-students/
GIST	<p>Around 4% of more than 14,000 Seattle Public Schools students and staff who participated in the district’s rapid testing clinics this week tested positive for COVID-19, said the district’s assistant deputy superintendent Carri Campbell.</p>

Volunteers and district staff administered the tests in pop-up clinics on Sunday and Monday after the state's largest district received a shipment of 60,000 rapid tests from the state health department last week. Seattle has about 50,000 students and 7,800 staff.

The testing was intended to help build a forecast of how many staff might be out for quarantine periods and need substitutes, and to slow virus transmission in classrooms after winter break. It came together quickly.

Campbell did not directly answer a question about whether there was a strong chance the district would transition back to remote learning, but stressed that in-person instruction is the district's priority, and the primary reason for the pop-up sites. She also said the district has been sending individual classrooms home when necessary. The district sent a message to families two weeks ago warning that if cases spiked after the holidays, classes could be moved online temporarily.

"We are meeting on a daily basis to look at all our data, and all COVID-related concerns," she said.

Last month, the district sent an urgent request to the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) for tests prior to the holiday break. On Dec. 28, DOH approved the order. Shortly after, the district's delivery drivers drove through snowfall to the city of Kalama to retrieve the tests from the state.

"We actually haven't ever gotten the rapid antigen tests from the Department of Health. We were thrilled," said Campbell.

The district had just a few days to coordinate labor to staff the testing clinics, and build a system to report positive cases to the state, because the normal vendor wasn't available on such short notice.

Officials were not able to provide a breakdown of the positive cases by staff and students on Tuesday, but Campbell noted that the staff absence rates on Tuesday, the first day of school in the new year, looked typical.

The remainder of the rapid tests are being used at school sites the rest of this week and next.

No other school district in Washington state has administered rapid tests in such a manner and scale; most, like SPS, primarily provide testing to students and staff who are symptomatic. A spokesperson for the Tacoma School District, which provides this type of testing at a clinic open daily, said she could not provide a test positivity rate.

Districts that do test the general population of students, like the Northshore School District, only report positive case counts on their websites, not the total number of tests administered. A spokesperson for the district did not immediately provide additional data on Tuesday. The Shoreline School District also runs a testing site for students, their families and staff regardless of symptoms, but a spokesperson for the district did not respond to an email seeking more information on positivity rates.

Other districts in the Puget Sound region, including Bellevue and Auburn, were planning to ramp up testing this week; however, winter weather delays and transportation shortages delayed testing of students and staff.

In Los Angeles, LA Unified, the nation's second-largest school district with more than 1 million students, requires all staff and students to test weekly for in-person instruction. The district's most recent test positivity rate was just under 2%.

Before this week, rapid tests hadn't been in wide use at SPS, except to test student athletes. The district uses PCR tests to diagnose students and staff who display symptoms.

	<p>The tests provided peace-of-mind for many families and staff as local and national case rates have skyrocketed over the holidays due to the spread of the omicron variant.</p> <p>There are additional testing options on the horizon for the school district.</p> <p>The district plans to create more regional testing sites for staff and students, regardless of symptom status, sometime this winter, said Campbell. So far, there are two — at Meany Middle School and Southshore K-8.</p> <p>Next month, the district also plans to roll out a “test-to-stay” program, coordinated with the Department of Health, which would allow students and staff who have close contacts with COVID-positive individuals to test out of lengthy quarantine periods.</p> <p>And, sometime this spring, the district plans to pilot a weekly batch testing program at a few schools, which would test all students and staff.</p> <p>The barrier to expanding thus far has been labor, said Campbell. While the Department of Health provides tests, vendors and lab services through its Learn to Return program for schools, it does not always provide the necessary labor to pull off large scale testing. But the district is now in the process of securing additional vendors to expand its testing capacity.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Kent mayor asks PD assistant chief to leave
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/kent-mayor-seeks-resignation-of-assistant-police-chief-who-posted-nazi-insignia-joked-about-the-holocaust/
GIST	<p>KENT — Mayor Dana Ralph said Tuesday night that she has asked for the resignation of Assistant Police Chief Derek Kammerzell for posting Nazi insignia on his office door, embracing the rank of a high official in Adolf Hitler’s dreaded paramilitary Schutzstaffel, or SS, and joking about the Holocaust.</p> <p>Ralph made the announcement at a City Council meeting at which she was sworn in for a new term as mayor. She said the decision came after public outcry and her unhappiness with the punishment imposed on Kammerzell by Chief Rafael Padilla last summer — two weeks off without pay, with the option of taking vacation pay during that time, and sensitivity training.</p> <p>Ralph said she asked the city attorney to contact the Kent police union and ask that Kammerzell step down.</p> <p>Ralph also met privately Tuesday with a delegation from the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle, which issued a blistering statement condemning Kammerzell and the city’s discipline.</p> <p>The controversy erupted when documents obtained by a private citizen watchdog group, No Secret Police, showed Kammerzell, a 27-year veteran of the Kent Police Department, had posted Nazi insignia on his office door, had embraced the rank of “obergruppenfuhrer” and joked about the Holocaust.</p> <p>For this behavior, Kammerzell received two weeks off without pay and was ordered to undergo sensitivity training, a punishment that evoked an angry response from the public at Kent City Hall, on social media and a sharp rebuke from the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle, which Tuesday demanded the city revisit the issue and reconsider its handling of Kammerzell’s offensive actions.</p> <p>The federation, along with its Jewish Community Relations Council, said it was “horrified” by Kammerzell’s actions — which included posting the insignia of an SS “obergruppenfuhrer” above the nameplate on his office door — and those amounted to “elevating and honoring Nazi imagery.”</p>

In her comments, Ralph said the city had been “rocked” by the issue and that was clear from public comments she had received since news of the incident broke that the “process didn’t produce the result that is acceptable to our community, or quite honestly, to me.”

“The city and I have worked extremely hard on our anti-racism efforts and we don’t want to undo the great work that has been done,” she said.

Public comments at the council meeting were unanimous in applauding the mayor’s decision and condemning Kammerzell’s actions, and questioning why he wasn’t fired or forced to resign earlier.

“He should have been fired on the spot when it happened,” said Gwen Allen-Carston, the executive director of the Kent Black Action Commission. “Because that didn’t happen, this is suspect.”

Police Chief Padilla, who consulted with the mayor, said he was “just trying to do the right thing.”

Kammerzell, during an interview with an outside investigator, also admitted to joking that his grandfather had died in the Holocaust — by falling out of a guard tower — and said that he once shaved his facial hair into a Hitler-style mustache.

He downplayed both incidents to investigators, stating the facial hair was part of “Movember,” a beard-growing fundraising event held every November to spotlight men’s health issues, and that the joke was 20 years old. The investigation found his explanations were convenient and less than credible.

Investigators also looked into allegations that a photograph taken of Kammerzell, dressed in lederhosen and standing behind Ralph at a city Oktoberfest celebration in 2019, appeared to showed him given the stiff-armed “heil Hitler” salute. Kammerzell suggested the photo caught him in the middle of waving.

Nazi officials holding the rank of obergruppenfuhrer were responsible for the operation of Hitler’s brutal slave-labor and death camps. By embracing that imagery, the federation said in a statement, “Kammerzell is supporting the extermination of six million Jews, including one million children, and five million other vulnerable individuals.

“This is an affront to the entire Puget Sound Jewish community and inexcusable,” the federation said. “Synagogues, Jewish community centers, and Jewish organizations rely on law enforcement to help protect them from violent, antisemitic attacks,” and Kammerzell’s callous actions undermine that trust, federation officials said.

Kammerzell told a local newspaper that he was embarrassed and sorry for the incident, and the city issued a statement saying it would not tolerate discrimination of any kind.

The Jewish Federation said the discipline imposed on Kammerzell was “completely inadequate, especially at a time when incidents of hate against the Jewish people are higher than they’ve been in almost 45 years.

“The absence of true accountability demanded of Kammerzell and the sheer lack of consequences in this situation are shocking,” the federation and Jewish Community Council said in a combined statement issued Tuesday afternoon.

Moreover, the statement said that the city of Kent’s “response demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of the impact of these acts by one of its assistant police chiefs on our local Jewish community” and the groups called for the city “to immediately revisit the situation, publicly recognize the harm and hurt caused to our Jewish community, and treat the offenses with the seriousness and care they deserve.”

According to the investigation, Kammerzell claimed he did not understand the significance of the insignia when he placed them above his name on his office door. At the time, he was head of the department’s special investigations and detective division. The insignia, apparently taken from the internet, was that of a one of the most senior officials in Hitler’s Third Reich.

HEADLINE	01/04 Boeing's plan to pull out of crisis
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/hoping-for-recovery-boeing-bosses-look-to-the-future-deflect-questions-on-the-max-crashes/
GIST	<p>After almost three years of crisis, with Boeing still facing immense challenges, two top Boeing leaders in exclusive interviews laid out their strategy: hunker down, fix the litany of current problems and rely on a revamp of the company's engineering culture to restore Boeing's stained reputation.</p> <p>Commercial Airplanes CEO Stan Deal said Boeing, for all its current problems, is in a better position than it was a year ago. "We see a much clearer path" in 2022, he said.</p> <p>Boeing Chief Engineer Greg Hyslop said recovery begins with the company's 52,000 engineering staff. "We're going to lead with engineering excellence," he said.</p> <p>Both executives deflected or flatly refused to answer questions about the engineering design mistakes that led to the two fatal 737 MAX crashes that have so damaged Boeing's image.</p> <p>This is a tough moment for Boeing.</p> <p>The company is loaded with \$42 billion of net debt; manufacturing defects have halted deliveries of its 787 Dreamliner; the MAX is back in service but its sales badly trail the competing Airbus jet.</p> <p>In 2021, settlements with the U.S. government and victims' families largely lifted the legal threats flowing from the two tragic crashes. Yet the reputational damage lingers. A new book and two major feature documentaries set to air in 2022 all portray a steep cultural decline at Boeing.</p> <p>And the pandemic continues to paralyze international air travel.</p> <p>While Deal professed optimism for the new year he was careful not to overpromise, perhaps wary of seeming to dictate a recovery schedule that depends heavily on Federal Aviation Administration approval.</p> <p>Sitting down inside the jet delivery center at Seattle's Boeing Field for his first substantive interview since taking over as CEO more than two years ago, Deal dismissed the view among some industry analysts that Boeing's leadership lacks the vision to pull it out of its series of travails.</p> <p>"You do have to reflect on what has happened. Learn from it. We've certainly dedicated ourselves to that mission," Deal said.</p> <p>He said the MAX's return to service in most countries made 2021 "a year of stabilizing" that will enable further recovery in 2022.</p> <p>By the time the FAA lifted the prolonged grounding of the MAX a year ago, Boeing had parked 450 completed airplanes. By October, the backlog was reduced to 370 MAXs, and Deal said Boeing should clear "the bulk" of the remaining backlog in 2022.</p> <p>After shedding 15,000 jobs in Washington state in 2020, then staying roughly level in 2021, he anticipates Boeing will hire several thousand people here this year.</p> <p>"The future as I see it for Boeing is actually very bright," Deal said.</p> <p>Yet with the local workforce still stressed by uncertainty about its future, Deal offered no assurance about when and where Boeing's next new plane might be built.</p>

Hyslop is the top technical executive on Boeing's leadership council. After the MAX tragedies he was tapped to restore the company's engineering culture.

He said Boeing has reorganized its engineering so business managers will have less influence on safety decisions and engineers more autonomy.

However, he declined to address how the engineering design process failed to flag the flaws in the MAX's flight control system that led to the crashes that killed 346 people in Indonesia and Ethiopia.

"I wasn't there. I don't know. I wasn't in that room," Hyslop said. "I'm not going to go back over the past. But I will say this: We all carry that with us heavily."

Deep concern among aviation analysts

Aviation experts and financial analysts are worried about Boeing's future and its competitive position against its only rival, Airbus.

In an interview, Adam Pilarski, senior vice president with aviation consulting firm Avitas, said Boeing's top leadership has not provided a vision of a way forward.

"You have to let the aviation community, your suppliers, your customers, know where you are going," he said.

In contrast, top executives at rival Airbus have exuded confidence and laid out plans.

In the smaller airliner category — the high-volume cash cow of the jet manufacturing business where Boeing's 737 MAX competes head-to-head with Airbus's A320neo — Airbus has a strong advantage and is maneuvering to keep it.

While Boeing hopes to get production up to 31 MAXs a month early in 2022 and ramp up cautiously from there, Airbus is already building 45 per month of the competing A320neo, and is sticking to its target of building an unprecedented 63 per month in 2023.

Airbus executives have touted a sustainable future of hydrogen-powered airplanes in the 2030s. While that may prove a mirage technically, Boeing simply won't discuss plans about future airplane designs amid doubts that it has the financial wherewithal to launch one in the foreseeable future.

"I did talk to some very big financial institutions and they were very skeptical about Boeing's continued success," Pilarski said.

Richard Aboulafia, a managing director at consultancy Aerodynamic Advisory, likewise perceives an "absence of leadership" at Boeing.

Following the financial collapse and breakup of General Electric, Aboulafia speculates that pressure could mount to monetize Boeing's defense and space assets by splitting them off.

While such a reversal of the 1997 merger with McDonnell Douglas might sound appealing to employees in the Puget Sound region, it potentially could have very negative consequences if the Commercial Airplanes division were left with most of the debt.

Aboulafia also fears Boeing's top leaders are willing to accept "a serious market share loss" in their failure to launch a plane to counter the hot-selling Airbus A321neo, the largest in the A320neo family of narrowbody jets.

With Boeing's 737 MAX now reduced to a 40% share of the market against the A320neo, Rob Stallard, an aerospace analyst with Vertical Research Partners, told investors last month that Airbus is set for a "decade of dominance" in that smaller jet sector.

Also last month, Ron Epstein, an analyst with Bank of America, wrote that “Boeing’s engineering strength and R&D spending, now near 10-year lows, could pose a risk to Boeing’s ability to develop” a new plane.

Revamped engineering culture

Hyslop insisted that the reorganization of the technical staff at Boeing prompted by the design failures that led to the MAX crashes will “strengthen and elevate engineering in the company.”

All Boeing’s engineering staff now report up through the technical ranks to him, taking some control away from managers focused on the business side of the operation.

As Deal put it, this change was made “so that there was a clear line of accountability for engineering. And no risk of this blur of business relative to pure technical excellence.”

Boeing’s development of the MAX was criticized for allowing business goals to brush aside technical safety concerns — such as the decision that mandated only cursory training for pilots to transition from the previous 737 model to the MAX.

Every week, Hyslop and Deal now attend a top-level safety meeting with overall Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun as well as the heads of the Defense and Space and Global Services divisions and their chief engineers.

And Hyslop said he’s begun a major internal initiative requiring senior engineers across the company to write detailed accounts of their design practices to ensure they are strictly adhered to in the future.

“It’ll provide a place where lessons learned can be quickly incorporated and then it will feed into future designs,” Hyslop said.

One key lesson has to be how those engineering processes missed the flaws in the design of the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System flight control software on the MAX — the most glaring of which was its dependence on a single sensor.

A month after the second MAX crash in March 2019, former Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg insisted that the Boeing engineers who designed MCAS “followed exactly the steps in our design and certification processes that consistently produce safe airplanes.”

But if Boeing has established where exactly the engineering scrutiny of that software faltered, it isn’t sharing the information.

Asked if any engineers had been held accountable for that tragic miss, Hyslop responded “I’m not gonna answer that question” and Boeing’s public relations staff intervened to shut down that line of inquiry.

In a more open exchange, Deal offered a rationale for not pointing to individuals with blame: He said Boeing seeks to “create a just culture ... not a punitive culture.”

A “just culture” — the standard for National Transportation Safety Board investigations into air accidents, whether fatal or not — is an approach whereby investigators try to find out what went wrong and fix it for the future, without blaming any individual for mistakes short of negligent or reckless behavior. The idea is to encourage those involved to come forward and be open about what happened, rather than hiding details of their errors to protect themselves.

“You look at why were the mistakes made, what learning can be taken away,” said Deal, “And how do you translate that to your design ecosystem.”

Pilarski of Avitas points to a more self-serving motivation.

“They don’t want to admit what went wrong” in the MAX crashes, Pilarski said. “They are in for a lot of legal liability.”

Digital transformation

The question of when Boeing will next use its revamped engineering organization to design a new airplane is a critical one.

Most analysts see what aviation analyst Aboulafia calls “a gaping hole” in Boeing’s jet lineup.

The Airbus A321neo is a large narrowbody jet seating more than 200 passengers and with the range to comfortably fly transatlantic or other regional international routes. The largest MAX, the MAX 10, is not yet certified and cannot match its performance.

Sales of the A321neo have skyrocketed as airlines buy them for routes previously flown only by larger, much more expensive widebody jets like the Boeing 787 and the Airbus A330.

The Airbus jet has essentially created a whole new airplane segment by itself, racking up more than 4,000 orders at Boeing’s expense. In significant customer defections in December, both Qantas of Australia and KLM of Holland passed up on the MAX and ordered the A321neo to replace their aging 737s.

To compete, most analysts think Boeing needs to design an all-new airplane, a narrowbody jet larger than the MAX and smaller than the 787.

“The necessity of doing exactly that plane is just getting more clear every day,” Aboulafia said.

Boeing doesn’t agree. Deal, while conceding disappointment in those recent losses, declared himself content with the MAX 10.

“I’m not in a rush right now,” he said. “There will be a next new airplane. The when, the how, the where, have yet to be answered.”

Both he and Hyslop said their focus now is not on designing that next new aircraft but on perfecting the digital modeling technology that Boeing plans to use to simulate the design and manufacture of future planes before any assembly lines are built.

Hyslop said Boeing intends “to design the factory to the same level of rigor we design that airplane” and to “build the first several 100 airplanes in a simulation.”

As Deal concedes, this is not Boeing’s first attempt to implement the concept — and the previous effort is not encouraging.

Back in 2004, Boeing trumpeted the same ambition for the 787, promising that not just the plane but the entire manufacturing system would be digitally created and tested before it was a physical reality.

Yet not only was the 787 the most delayed, troubled and financially disastrous jet development program in Boeing’s history, but 10 years after its initial delivery, manufacturing defects — tiny gaps at major structural joins — have put a stop to all but a few deliveries for the past 14 months.

In an otherwise upbeat take on Boeing’s prospects for 2022, financial analyst Seth Seifman of J.P. Morgan pushed out his projection for when Boeing will resume 787 deliveries until the third quarter — starving it until then of the cash those jets should bring in.

In October, Boeing projected the cost of all the extra work to fix the 787 manufacturing quality defects would be \$1 billion. That estimated cost will keep growing as long as the deliveries are stalled.

	<p>Aboulafia is astonished at the prospect of the 787 delivery halt potentially stretching past the first half of the new year.</p> <p>“What’s going on here? And why isn’t there any kind of clear, level explanation?” he asked. “It’s just bizarre.”</p> <p>Deal declined to say when in 2022 deliveries of the 787 might resume.</p> <p>“I’m not going to rush my regulator,” he said, referring to the FAA, which is closely scrutinizing Boeing’s proposed fixes to ensure that every plane meets the required technical specifications.</p> <p>Boeing’s now frayed relationship with the FAA is “improving, but we have work to do,” Deal added.</p> <p>In addition to resuming 787 deliveries sometime in 2022, Deal anticipates ramping up 737 MAX production and getting the MAX 7 and MAX 10 models certified.</p> <p>He also revealed that Boeing is currently designing a new “high gross weight” version of the largest Dreamliner, the 787-10, bumping up its payload and range to make it more competitive against the Airbus A350-900.</p> <p>Deal anticipates too that the pandemic-induced shift in global supply chains will produce another bumper year of freighter jet sales, the one area of commercial aviation where Boeing still dominates Airbus.</p> <p>Both he and Hyslop confirmed Boeing will launch a freighter version of the giant 777X, built in Everett.</p> <p>Deal said the company will hire workers back in the Puget Sound region this year “in the thousands.”</p> <p>With a labor market grown tight in the pandemic and with stiff hiring competition from Amazon, SpaceX and Blue Origin, Boeing currently has more than 5,000 job openings in the state, largely in quality, manufacturing and engineering.</p> <p>To staff up again, Aboulafia said Boeing had better change its longtime labor playbook of working relentlessly to “crush unions and take away worker benefits.”</p> <p>And yet, though Boeing clearly has a long path ahead if it’s to recover, Aboulafia said it’s not impossible.</p> <p>“They still have seriously good people. The only thing that’s needed is leadership. Everything else is in place,” he said. “Yeah, there’s plenty of hope.”</p> <p>“It requires vision,” Aboulafia added.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 More snow in western Washington forecast
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/please-slow-down-police-beg-drivers-as-black-ice-causes-crashes-around-puget-sound-area/
GIST	<p>Snow may be melting, but that doesn’t mean hazards are gone from the roads. Black ice is rampant, and certain areas of Western Washington could see more snow later this week.</p> <p>After a collision in Tacoma on the Highway 7 extension to northbound Interstate 5 involving between eight and 12 cars early Tuesday morning, Washington State Patrol warned drivers to watch out for black ice, which can lead to spinouts.</p> <p>It all began when a Prius went into a ditch, according to State Patrol spokesman Trooper Robert Reyer.</p>

A trooper arrived, and as he was trying to assist the driver of Prius, cars started crashing around him, one after the other.

“He’s a newer trooper who doesn’t work the freeways, but because of a different collision (involving a jackknifed semitrailer that closed three lanes in DuPont at 2 a.m.,) he was helping out,” Reyer said. “I’m sure he hated every minute of it.”

One person was taken to the hospital as a precaution, but there were no serious injuries in the Tacoma crash, said Reyer.

The Washington State Department of Transportation reported that the collision was cleared shortly after 6:30 a.m.

Warmer temperatures on Monday melted snow, then cooler temperatures at night froze the moisture on the roads creating black ice, which is nearly invisible on poorly lit roads, Reyer said.

Reyer said several days last week each had more than 150 collisions caused by weather and road conditions.

“People are just driving too fast for the conditions and following too closely,” he said.

More treacherous conditions could be on the way, especially in Northwest Washington and in any of the Cascade passes.

According to the National Weather Service, snow is forecast for Whatcom and northern Skagit counties from Wednesday night to Thursday morning. Delays should also be expected for anyone crossing the Cascades on a mountain pass through Thursday morning, which may see freezing rain and wintry mix.

In the lowlands of Seattle, there will be a slight chance of rain and snow on Wednesday evening before 11 p.m. when temperatures will start to creep toward a low of 35 degrees.

If there are flurries, less than half an inch of accumulation is expected, the weather services said. Thursday will also bring above-freezing temps and rain with a high around 48 degrees.

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HEADLINE	01/04 New Covid variant detected in France
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/new-covid-variant-ihu-with-46-mutations-detected-in-france/
GIST	<p>Experts are keeping a wary eye on yet another COVID-19 variant, this one with 46 mutations.</p> <p>It was detected in France and showed up in a traveler who recently arrived from a three-day stay in Cameroon, French researchers said in a preprint study published on medRxiv, which means it has not yet been peer-reviewed.</p> <p>While researchers were monitoring the strain to ascertain how infectious it is or whether it poses a danger, experts emphasized that its discovery alone was not cause for alarm. Moreover, it was noted even before omicron took over the world stage and “has been on our radar,” WHO incident manager on COVID Abdi Mahamud said at a news briefing in Geneva on Tuesday, according to Bloomberg. “That virus had a lot of chances to pick up.”</p> <p>So far, indications are that it hasn’t. But it did manage to infect 12 people in Marseille, in southeastern France.</p> <p>The 46 mutations had not been detected in other countries, The Independent noted.</p>

	<p>The person infected with the B.1.640.2 variant, dubbed IHU after being discovered by scientists at the IHU Mediterranee Infection, was fully vaccinated and had just returned from a three-day trip to Cameroon when they tested positive, the researchers said.</p> <p>Any speculation or alarm would be premature, the researchers said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 WA Sec. of State opts in vaccine mandate
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3300663/washington-secretary-of-states-office-ends-holdout-will-implement-covid-vaccine-mandate/
GIST	<p>The Washington Secretary of State's office will finally implement Gov. Jay Inslee's COVID-19 state worker vaccine mandate, after operating as the lone holdout under Kim Wyman.</p> <p>Inslee's mandate applied to staff members of all state agencies, except for those working under an elected official. Up until this week, the Secretary of State's Office was the only department that opted not to apply the mandate, with Wyman stating that she "couldn't live with forcing someone to choose between keeping their job and getting a vaccine."</p> <p>Wyman — a Republican — left the role in November of 2021. Democrat Steve Hobbs was appointed by Inslee to replace Wyman until a special election is held in November of 2022. The winner of that election will serve out the remaining two years of Wyman's term, followed by a regularly scheduled election for the office in 2024.</p> <p>Speaking to his decision to implement the vaccine mandate, Hobbs described it as a "commitment to the health and safety of our employees."</p> <p>According to numbers provided by Hobbs' office, an estimated 70% of employees working under him have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, although he does expect that "there will probably be a few employees" who will opt to leave their roles over the mandate.</p> <p>Similar vaccine worker mandates are also in place for King County and Seattle city employees, despite receiving significant pushback from members of law enforcement within the Seattle Police Department and King County Sheriff's Office. As of November of 2021, 95% of county workers were reported to be vaccinated. Seattle reported a 94% vaccination rate among its own city-level employees.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 First Indigenous Seattle council president
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3300549/juarez-presdient-seattle-city-council/
GIST	<p>In Seattle City Council's first session of 2022, Debora Juarez has been elected council president in a unanimous 9-0 vote by her fellow councilmembers.</p> <p>Previously held by Lorena Gonzalez who left the position in a now-failed bid for mayor, the role holds some small authority and prestige as it is tasked with establishing committees and making appointments therein.</p> <p>"I'm honored by my colleague's trust in my leadership during these challenging times," Juarez — who represents District 5 — wrote in a statement on social media. "I commit to you and our city to serve as a bridge-builder and lead with my values: humility, civility, effectiveness and an appreciation for each other's humanity."</p> <p>Juarez was first elected to city council in 2015. Over her tenure, she's sat decidedly apart from the council's more progressive wing, voting against the 2020 Jump Start Seattle payroll tax proposal, speaking out against efforts to defund the police in the wake of 2020's protests over the murder of George Floyd,</p>

	<p>and was one of a slate of business-friendly candidates endorsed in 2019 by the Seattle Chamber of Commerce’s political arm, the Civic Alliance for a Sound Economy.</p> <p>Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda took the opportunity to thank Juarez for her service, highlighting her support for upzoning to allow for denser residential land use.</p> <p>“I appreciate the joint interest that you and I share for creating a denser city, a city that allows for more families to live here, for elders to live here, and for workers to be in our city, a city that strives to strengthen and broaden workplace standards and protections for our most vulnerable and to support small, diverse businesses,” Mosqueda said in Tuesday’s council session. “You have done that not only in District 5, but you’ve done that for entire city, and it’s been an honor of mine to be able to work with you.”</p> <p>No other councilmembers were nominated, although Councilmember Lisa Herbold was rumored to be in contention at one point. Juarez, a member of the Blackfeet Nation, acknowledged Herbold in her acceptance remarks.</p> <p>“I never thought in my life I’d be sitting here,” Juarez continued. “[Herbold and I share] the whole understanding of the Blackfeet way of knowing ... and how we come together for the greater good.”</p> <p>Notably, Juarez is also the first Indigenous council president in Seattle’s history.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Interim SPD Chief Diaz to permanent job?
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3300509/interim-spd-chief-adrian-diaz-chance-to-win-job-permanently/
GIST	<p>Seattle’s next full-time police chief has largely remained up in the air since Carmen Best left the role in September of 2020, with Adrian Diaz having served in the position in an interim capacity ever since. But with new Mayor Bruce Harrell having now taken office, the city could soon get some long-awaited clarity.</p> <p>Diaz — who became interim chief on Sept. 3, 2021 — has served with the Seattle Police Department for over two decades. He began his career in SPD as a patrol officer, later serving with the Bike Unit, as an undercover officer, and then a member of the investigations unit before becoming deputy chief under Best. Prior to that, he was also the assistant chief for the Collaborative Policing Bureau.</p> <p>When previous Mayor Jenny Durkan appointed him to be SPD’s interim chief, she intimated at the time that she wouldn’t begin a search for a new permanent chief for the remainder of 2021, citing the uncertainty surrounding what the department might look like in the future amid ongoing budget discussions with city council.</p> <p>As Harrell begins to implement his vision for Seattle’s various departments, the door has been left open for Diaz to drop the “interim” from his title once and for all.</p> <p>“I believe that I have to give everyone an opportunity to show some brilliance, show some talent,” Harrell said as part of his first question-and-answer session with the media. “We’re having discussions right now — he does not know what it looks like to work for a mayor like me, I have to give him that opportunity.”</p> <p>Harrell went on to note that his office will be “making some decisions here in the first quarter” on whether to stick with Diaz long-term, or conduct a national search for Seattle’s next police chief.</p> <p>The last search for a new police chief in Seattle took place in 2018 after then-chief Katherine O’Toole stepped down, ultimately ending in Best’s appointment. The selection came after a controversial process, which saw Best left off the initial list of three finalists chosen by a 25-member search committee.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 College students isolated, quarantined
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/01/04/colleges-student-quarantines-omicron/

Oscar Lloyd was eating with some friends in a lounge at his college dorm when he got the email: He had tested positive for the [coronavirus](#), and he had two hours to pack and move into isolation housing for 10 days.

“Everyone went into a frenzy,” the first-year student from Virginia said. He was the second person in his group of friends at Columbia University to test positive. He called his parents and some other friends he had just been with. His roommate called his parents. Several people called to get flights moved up to the following day — it was just days before the end of the semester, and they didn’t want to get stuck on campus in quarantine.

Thousands of college students ended 2021 and will begin 2022 in isolation and quarantine as the [omicron variant](#) surges in the United States. For school administrators, the sudden outbreaks sparked logistical scrambles to get students swiftly and safely housed away from others.

Some of the first warning signs that the pandemic had changed, again, were on university campuses: Cases spiked last month and many colleges announced they would [hold finals online](#), extend the winter break, or resume classes virtually. In some cases those decisions were driven by the limitations on housing available to separate infected and potentially exposed students from others on campus — the virus was spreading so rapidly that models predicted broadening waves of exposures.

When federal officials updated [guidance on isolation and quarantine](#) last week, announcing that asymptomatic people infected with coronavirus need only isolate for five days, rather than 10, school leaders responded with a mix of relief, concern and uncertainty. Many were seeing mild, moderate or asymptomatic cases — but in unexpectedly large numbers.

Lynn Goldman, dean of the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University, said university officials at multiple schools had been hoping for revised guidelines. If students have symptoms, they have to stay in isolation, she said. “But if they’re asymptomatic, and they’re all vaccinated — I think the new CDC policy is very reasonable in that regard.”

Gerri Taylor, co-chair of the American College Health Association’s coronavirus task force, said that colleges are anticipating more specific guidelines targeted for their institutions from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in response to urgent requests from university officials.

She said that many are questioning if they should revise timing for isolation and quarantine, or stick with the 10-day requirement because students live so closely together in dorms and apartments, and the omicron variant appears to be so highly transmissible.

Taylor said she had heard from schools across the country that are still seeing rises in coronavirus cases even over the break, when most students are away. “They’re already inundated with cases,” she said. At one large university, Taylor said, the school’s health director reported a 30 percent positivity rate over the break period. According to Taylor, the health director said they were hiring more contact tracers and feeling completely overwhelmed, as though everyone will be in quarantine when students return.

“ ‘I don’t know how we can handle these numbers,’ ” Taylor said. “This is the sentiment I’m hearing.”

At many schools, cases jumped alarmingly at the end of the semester. After single digits all fall, Bowie State University reported in mid-December that 121 cases had been identified in two days. Many students went home to isolate, and some moved into off-campus housing the university provided during the break, said Cassandra Robinson, a spokeswoman.

At Cornell University, more than 850 students were in isolation in mid-December, according to a school spokesman. Anuli Ononye, the student assembly president, said before winter break that she and other student government leaders were working with the administration to provide support: They

curated a website with games and movies to help students get through the solitary time and planned to give out cookies.

At George Washington University 143 residential students were in isolation at its peak in December. Seventy-five of them stayed on campus and the others left to isolate at home during the break.

School officials are working to expand the amount of quarantine and isolation housing they have available for the spring semester, Goldman said.

For those students confined to dorm rooms rather than traveling and celebrating the break with family and friends, the abrupt change in the pandemic could not have felt more stark.

Lloyd moved into his isolation room, where he found loads of empty water bottles, food left in the mini refrigerator and papers on the desk from the student who had stayed there before him: It looked, he said, as though, “suddenly someone said, ‘You can go,’ and he dropped everything and ran.”

The room had yellow walls, a single window, a bed, a set of drawers, and an empty wardrobe without any hangers.

It reminded him of a prison cell, and of the Charlotte Perkins Gilman story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” in which the narrator, confined to a single room, unravels.

“It’s home,” he added lightly.

Unlike his dorm room, with an open window onto the busy street, fraternity row and all the usual bustle and cacophony of college and New York City life, this was unnaturally quiet.

Every night, for hours, there was a soft cooing noise he couldn’t quite place; owls, maybe?

Sometimes, through the walls, he could hear other people coughing and hacking. He himself felt perfectly healthy, making it seem all the more discordant, as though he were trapped in a plague house.

The university provided lots of good food, but without exercise, he didn’t have much of an appetite. He had to scrap plans to go ice-skating at Rockefeller Center with friends, and couldn’t just take a walk through the park, skateboard or work out.

“It’s suddenly gone from doing everything all at once to doing absolutely nothing,” he said. “It’s a sharp shift.”

To his isolation dorm, he brought music, and lots of books. A few days into his isolation — even with the last of his finals — he had polished off a book about meaningless jobs by the anthropologist David Graeber, as well as Hunter S. Thompson’s “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,” and was starting on the novel “The Secret History,” by Donna Tartt.

At his home in Alexandria, his brothers FaceTimed him so he could watch them put up their Christmas tree. The family played a virtual trivia game with him. His parents sent him a mini-tree, with batteries to light it up.

They were surprised by his positive test because the school had been so careful, his mother, Helen Lloyd, said. She was glad he had been responsible and been tested, and was helping to keep others safe.

But to be alone in a room for days without being allowed outside to exercise or get fresh air, or see friends, she said, “that can be very hard on a lot of kids.”

He was allowed out after midnight on Dec. 27. He told his mom he would walk out at 12:01, and catch the next bus home. “I’m leaving,” he said, “the second I’m allowed to leave.”

HEADLINE	01/04 Forecasters: omicron peak this month
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/04/forecasters-say-omicron-peak-could-come-this-month/
GIST	<p>The latest surge of coronavirus cases could peak as soon as this month while the highly contagious omicron variant speeds through the U.S. population.</p> <p>That's according to multiple infectious-disease experts, who create models forecasting the spread. The country has been hit hard and fast by the variant, though reports of omicron only emerged in November, and states are bracing for a rough few weeks as hospitals fill up and essential workers call out sick.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "If it's not surging in your area, it likely will — and likely will soon. ... It's coming, and it's coming fast," said Justin Lessler, a University of North Carolina epidemiology professor who helps coordinate a separate coronavirus modeling hub. <p>The nation's case count is already reaching record levels, as the omicron variant tears through the Northeast and the Mid-Atlantic.</p> <p>Some southern states are experiencing the sharpest increases in cases and hospitalizations over the past week — places with lower immunization rates and fewer mask and vaccine mandates, our colleague Fenit Nirappil writes. As he notes, that's created a different environment for the virus to spread, leaving health experts unsure whether outbreaks will wind up deadlier than in the North.</p> <p>Forecasting the future Everyone from beleaguered state officials to exhausted health-care workers wants to know when this new wave will subside. They hope the United States will mirror data out of South Africa, which showed a steep increase and then a quick descent in cases.</p> <p>One forecast from Columbia University researchers predicts cases could reach their highest levels the week of Jan. 9, and then decline from there. Another from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington School of Medicine estimates infections could top out in late January, though that will likely soon be updated to an even earlier date.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "It's spreading much faster than we ever expected," said Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at IHME. <p>The caveat: Some health experts are quick to note the virus has proven itself to be unpredictable time and time again.</p> <p>As our colleague Joel Achenbach writes: "Forecasts of how the pandemic will play out have repeatedly been incorrect, to the point that some modelers have stopped trying to make caseload projections four weeks out, instead limiting their forecasts to one week ahead."</p> <p>An important indicator In conversations with health experts, they've repeatedly pointed to hospitalizations as the metric to track closely. It's a sentiment echoed by both current and former health officials, like Biden's chief medical adviser, Anthony S. Fauci, and Scott Gottlieb, a former Food and Drug Administration commissioner.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "The real bottom line that you want to be concerned about is, are we getting protected by the vaccines from severe disease leading to hospitalization?" Fauci said Sunday on ABC's "This Week."• Hospitalizations are a "much more useful indicator as we pivot to a virus that overall has been milder than previous strains that we've seen," said David Rubin, who monitors coronavirus trends as the head of PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. <p>Data on case counts and hospitalizations serve different purposes, some say. For state officials, infection rates are important to understand where the virus is spreading and the demographics of the populations most impacted.</p>

- **“I think from the epidemiological standpoint, case counts are important,” said Michael Fraser, CEO of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials.** “But in terms of capacity and severity and acuity and ultimately number of deaths, I think hospitalizations is probably a better number.”

Coronavirus-related hospitalizations rose 27 percent in the last week, according to data tracked by The Post, though they often lag behind case counts. Early U.S. data and several international studies point to omicron [being less severe](#) — particularly for those vaccinated and boosted — but the sheer volume of new infections means covid-19 patients may still overwhelm hospitals.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Airlines continue to struggle: staff, weather
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/transportation/2022/01/04/omicron-weather-flights-cancellations/
GIST	<p>Airlines continued to struggle with staffing and weather issues Tuesday, with more than 1,400 additional flights canceled, but they are hoping that schedule reductions and a post-holiday slowdown in passenger traffic will enable them to return to normal operations.</p> <p>Among major U.S. carriers, Southwest Airlines continued to be the hardest hit. The carrier said it canceled roughly 300 of the more than 3,600 it scheduled Tuesday across 121 airports. The Dallas-based carrier was trying to recover from storms in the Midwest over the weekend that affected its operations in Chicago, only to be slammed by a snowstorm at its Baltimore hub on Monday.</p> <p>Indeed, the carrier said Tuesday that many of the day’s cancellations were at Baltimore Washington International Marshall Airport, where it operates one of its largest hubs.</p> <p>After several difficult days, regional carrier SkyWest also continues to make improvements, with 194, or 9 percent, of its flights canceled Tuesday, compared with just over 40, roughly 17 percent of Monday’s scheduled departures. The Utah-based carrier, which has partnerships with United Airlines, Delta Air Lines, American Airlines and Alaska Airlines, did not respond to requests for comment.</p> <p>The holiday season has been rough for airlines and their customers in the United States and around the globe as carriers struggle with the omicron variant’s effects on staffing and with storms in hubs that forced the cancellations of several hundred, then several thousand flights. More than 3,000 flights to, from and within the United States were canceled Monday, the worst day by far in a nearly two-week span of flight disruptions.</p> <p>Since significant numbers of cancellations began Dec. 24, more than 18,000 U.S. flights have been canceled. Many passengers have taken to social media to complain about hours-long waits to reach customer service agents by phone, saying that efforts to rebook flights online or use airline apps have proved frustrating.</p> <p>But amid those frustrations, some hopeful signs emerged. In the D.C. region, where heavy snow prompted the Federal Aviation Administration to temporarily halt inbound traffic at Baltimore-Washington International Marshall and Reagan National airports for several hours Monday, flight operations were slowly returning to normal.</p> <p>According to FlightAware, roughly 23 percent of scheduled departures were canceled at BWI, compared with 42 percent on Monday. At National Airport, by far the hardest hit of the region’s three airports, 23 percent of departing flights were canceled Tuesday, compared with 87 percent on Monday. At Washington Dulles International, 5 percent of departures were canceled — a fraction of the 25 percent on Monday.</p> <p>Air traffic into and out of O’Hare International and Midway in Chicago also significantly improved Tuesday after the airports were the hub of air travel disruptions over the weekend. On Saturday, 408 departures at O’Hare were canceled, while 129 out of Midway were scrubbed. Nearly 600 flights into both</p>

airports also were canceled. By Tuesday, there were only 34 canceled departures at O'Hare and 21 at Midway.

It is not clear when the flight disruptions will end. Some carriers, including JetBlue Airways, have preemptively reduced their flight schedules for at least a portion of January in hopes of better matching staffing levels to flight operations. JetBlue officials also said they hoped that preemptively canceling some flights would avoid leaving customers stranded at the last minute.

Alaska Airlines, which has been trying to recover after a Dec. 26 storm dumped record amounts of snow on Seattle, said it is reaching out to customers via email to let them know if there are issues with their flights.

Like most carriers, the Seattle-based carrier also is struggling with a higher-than-usual number of absences among employees due to [coronavirus](#) infections. That, the airline said in an emailed statement, has complicated recovery in many of its hubs.

"We sincerely apologize for the considerable inconvenience and understandable frustration that our guests have experienced this past week," the carrier said. "We're using all our resources to get our guests to their destination as soon as possible, while operating safely."

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HEADLINE	01/04 Snoqualmie Tribe: protect most sacred site
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/news/2022/01/snoqualmie-tribe-asks-support-protect-their-most-sacred-site
GIST	<p>An astonishing 1.5 to over 2 million people visit Snoqualmie Falls a year. With the increase in recreation and growing allure of Snoqualmie Falls, the tribe that considers this area sacred says the land is being "loved to death."</p> <p>The increase in recreation has resulted in the degradation of their ancestral lands, but one particularly loud intrusion – helicopter tours flying close to the falls – is a consistent disruption to their spiritual connection to the falls.</p> <p>The falls are considered the Snoqualmie Tribe's place of creation. It is where they gather to connect in ceremony and prayer to their ancestors and their creator. The noise of the helicopter tours make prayer incredibly difficult.</p> <p>Billows of water stream down Snoqualmie Falls and erupt into a cloudy mist as it reaches the bottom of the 268 foot drop into the Snoqualmie river. The hiss of the falls is a soothing invitation to replenish mind, body and spirit in prayer and to convene with the generations of Snoqualmie people that came before.</p> <p>Threatening a sacred site</p> <p>Tribal leaders say low-flying helicopter tours are infringing on the rights of the Snoqualmie Tribe to practice their cultural beliefs and enjoy what is considered a sacred site.</p> <p>Thud, Thud, Thud, Thud, Thud. The calm is abruptly overwhelmed by the blunt slapping sounds of helicopter blades.</p> <p>"On a nice day, you'll see a taxi of helicopters or other smaller aircraft as they view the falls," Christopher Castleberry, Snoqualmie tribal member, tribal council member and deputy secretary told Crosscut. "The start of summer is a very spiritual time where we take to the falls and we all try to visit there more often together, so it's super inconvenient that their peak season is the time that we're trying to be there together."</p> <p>The People of the Moon</p> <p>The Snoqualmie Tribe, also called The People of the Moon, believe that Moon the Transformer created the waterfall and the first man and woman, making Snoqualmie Falls a sacred site.</p>

“It is our beginning and our end,” McKenna Sweet Dorman, Snoqualmie tribal member and assistant director of governmental affairs, said. “The transformation of that water travels over the lip of the falls, hitting the plunge pool becoming the mist and carrying those prayers to our ancestors and the creator.”

The tribe also [worries about the danger](#) of low flying helicopter tours in addition to feeling disrespected and they have asked the public and the Federal Aviation Administration to help them. “I see my grandma in the mist, and I feel a connection with her,” Castleberry said. “It's the only place I can do that and it's sad that people take advantage and try to exploit that and ruin that experience for us.”

Castleberry is referring to an advertisement on the website of a company called, [Tinggly](#), which promoted a helicopter tour by Atomic Helicopters, a small Seattle based company. The website promotes the tour by sharing information about Snoqualmie Falls being a sacred and traditional burial site for the Snoqualmie Tribe.

Fancy flying

The advertisement has since been taken down and Tinggly has not responded to requests for comment by phone or email.

Sara Andersen, general manager and charter director at [Atomic Helicopters](#), asserts that Tinggly posted that advertisement without the consent or knowledge of the company and once they became aware of it she was told to reach out to Tinggly and request that they remove Atomic Helicopters from their site.

Less than a dozen of Atomic Helicopter’s flights went over the falls this year, each maintained a distance of 1,800 feet or higher and many of these flights were guests of the Salish Lodge, according to Andersen. But as the Snoqualmie Tribe has warned, some local helicopter tours may not be nearly as precautionous as Andersen says Atomic Helicopters is.

“Classic Helicopters in Auburn and Helicopters Northwest, now they do some fancy flying but we're the squares of the aviation world,” Andersen said.

The Snoqualmie Tribe says its initial outreach to Atomic Helicopters tours didn’t result in any change. After Dec. 13, when Crosscut spoke to Andersen, all tours that included views of Snoqualmie Falls were removed from their website. Andersen says that they will no longer be including Snoqualmie Falls on any of their future flights either.

“I know we can't stop everyone from flying over their sacred space, but I know that we can do our small part,” Andersen said. Classic Helicopters and Helicopter’s Northwest did not return phone calls or emails requesting comment.

Snoqualmie Tribe Ancestral Lands Movement

This recent decision by Atomic Helicopters is one small step in the direction the Snoqualmie Tribe is working toward. The tribe’s concerns about unregulated air traffic disturbing their most sacred site has become part of the [Snoqualmie Tribe Ancestral Lands Movement](#) that launched this past summer.

“Part of the intent for that movement is to provide actionable things that people can do to practice tribal acknowledgement, tribal support, and [land acknowledgement](#),” explained Jaime Martin, Snoqualmie tribal member and executive director of governmental affairs.

Support for the Snoqualmie Tribe Ancestral Lands Movement continues to grow. The cities of Issaquah and Sammamish have released proclamations stating their support for the Snoqualmie Tribe Ancestral Lands Movement and over 46,000 people have [signed a petition](#) in support of their efforts to steward the land for future generations, just as they have since time immemorial.

“Hopefully, one of the things that people feel like they can engage with is being able to file an FAA complaint,” Martin said.

A place worth preserving

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulates aviation for the United States and the surrounding waters. They impose flight restrictions over national monuments and landmarks and even regulate drone usage near monuments and dams. Snoqualmie Falls is listed as a [Traditional Cultural Property](#) by the [National Register of Historic Places](#) which lists historical places worthy of preservation.

In order to preserve and protect this sacred site and the millions of people who visit it, the tribe is [urging the public to support](#) them by filing a [FAA complaint](#) about the unregulated airspace above Snoqualmie Falls that has become an impediment to the tribe's cultural sovereignty and safety.

Donnell Evans, spokesman for the FAA commented through email that, "The FAA is aware of the concerns and is working with all parties to consider available options."

The Snoqualmie Tribe is seeking restrictions similar to the FAA and National Park Service [Air Tour Management Plans](#) which restrict the frequency, altitude, duration and more for commercial air tours. "We know they can do it," said Rob Roy Smith, attorney for the Snoqualmie Tribe from Kilpatrick Townsend. "It's a matter of motivating them to do it to uphold their responsibility to Snoqualmie people."

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HEADLINE	01/04 China expands port, military base network
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/4/global-reach-china-expands-port-and-military-base/
GIST	<p>China is expanding a network of more than 95 port facilities around the world and is working to establish a system of overseas military bases that analysts say will support Chinese President Xi Jinping's announced ambition for global dominance.</p> <p>The port network is part of Mr. Xi's Belt and Road Initiative, a multitrillion-dollar infrastructure and development program that Beijing has been pushing for nearly a decade in an effort to cement its status as an economic superpower and win support in the developing world for China's brand of communism.</p> <p>The latest addition to the network will likely be in Cuba, which also is ruled by a fraternal communist regime. China announced on Dec. 24 an agreement with Havana to cooperate on Cuban infrastructure development. No details were disclosed, but the agreement was hailed as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.</p> <p>China experts say the agreement marked a significant milestone in Beijing's plan to build a global empire of commercial ports and military bases, including several others expected to be established close to U.S. shores.</p> <p>One U.S. official described the global port network as a dual-use system to serve civilian and military needs. Work is being carried out under the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, a subset of the Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to revive the ancient Silk Road trade routes connecting China with the rest of the world.</p> <p>A U.S. Naval War College report has warned that the 95 overseas ports could ultimately serve as strategic access points for the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Analysts say Beijing's main commercial objective is to gain control over global shipping hubs. The goal, they say, is to expand China's power over the international flow of goods to guarantee dominance for Chinese products on the world market.</p> <p>The expansion is also seen as a strategic method to advance political controls to preserve Chinese Communist Party rule.</p> <p>Beijing is promoting its model of governance because Chinese leaders believe the free and open liberal global order that the United States set up in the wake of World War II threatens their authoritarian system.</p>

Mr. Xi announced the expansion in a 2017 speech in which he warned of intensifying competition with the free market capitalist world.

“The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is no walk in the park or mere drum-beating and gong-clanging. The whole party must be prepared to make ever more difficult and harder efforts,” Mr. Xi said in announcing a “new era” for China at the center of the world stage.

Mr. Xi said “socialism with Chinese characteristics” — the euphemism for China’s hybrid brand of communism — has brought wealth and power and suggested the nation could become the choice for developing nations and ultimately for the entire world.

The Biden administration, while embracing some harder-line policies of the Trump administration, has struggled to effectively respond to the Chinese global strategy. The administration has framed the situation as a sportslike competition between China and the United States, with the two sides offering rival models for other nations to judge.

Critics say the U.S. administration underestimates the scope and severity of China’s challenge. “Biden has little understanding of what is happening” with regard to the Chinese expansion around the world, said a U.S. official familiar with China’s growing port network.

Shipping container missiles

One danger behind the emerging Chinese base-port network stems from the PLA’s development of long-range missiles capable of being fired from launchers disguised as shipping containers, said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The PLA is building a variant of the YJ-18 long-range cruise missile that can be fired from a mobile launcher disguised as a 40-foot-long shipping container. The container missile was copied from Russia’s system known as Klub-K. When fully developed, the system could turn China’s container ports into cruise missile bases.

U.S. military commanders and defense policymakers have focused heavily on Beijing’s regional ambition to control waters close to China.

However, the official who spoke on the condition of anonymity said that “in the unlikely scenario of a war with China, the first strikes will likely come from containerized missiles.”

Others say the prospect that China could fire such missiles from some of the 5,600 government-controlled merchant vessels amplifies the threat.

“Deploying container-launched missiles on its merchant fleet would significantly enhance China’s warfighting capabilities,” retired Navy Capt. Raul Pedrozo wrote in the current issue of the International Law Studies journal. “Once perfected, [container missiles] will provide China with a long-range precision strike capability that can engage both surface combatants and land-based targets.”

While the Pentagon controls a string of military bases spanning the globe, China has just one well-publicized overseas military base, which is in Djibouti along the strategic Red Sea in the Horn of Africa.

A report last month by the online newsletter Silk Road Briefing said Beijing has been operating a base in Tajikistan’s Pamir Mountains for two years. China is reported to be expanding the base and building another on Tajikistan’s border with Afghanistan.

The Pentagon’s most recent annual report on the Chinese military said the PLA is expanding its footprint with plans for bases and facilities in Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, the Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola and Tajikistan.

“A global PLA military logistics network and PLA military facilities could both interfere with U.S. military operations and support offensive operations against the United States as the PRC’s global military objectives evolve,” the report said.

The PLA’s first naval base on the Atlantic is being negotiated for access to the deep-water port in Equatorial Guinea, according to The Wall Street Journal, citing intelligence reports.

Other published reports say China is working on setting up military bases in the Persian Gulf, negotiating with Iran for a base on Kish Island or the port of Chabahar, and seeking to establish a base at the United Arab Emirates’ Khalifa Port. Israel’s Haifa Port has also been the target of a Chinese commercial deal.

China denies expansion

Chinese officials sharply reject the narrative that Beijing is engaged in military expansionism around the world.

A Chinese Embassy spokesman said China is developing its national defense forces to safeguard its sovereignty, security and development interests as well as international and regional peace and security.

“China is firmly committed to the path of peaceful development, adopting a national defense policy that is defensive in nature, and upholding world and regional peace and stability,” the spokesman, Liu Pengyu, said in an email. “China has never engaged in arms race or military expansion. These policies and positions are not going to change.”

The U.S. military’s global basing system still dwarfs the Chinese port and base network. Dozens of major naval and land bases have allowed the United States to project power around the world without challenge since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Still, analysts say Beijing’s activities represent a direct challenge to the U.S.-led international democratic order. China’s military has simultaneously engaged in a massive warship buildup that includes the development of aircraft carriers and guided-missile ships. It appears to be geared toward confronting the U.S. Navy.

From 2014 to 2018, the Chinese navy deployed more warships than the combined navies of Britain, Germany, India and Spain.

The U.S. government has been working diplomatically behind the scenes to limit or block the Chinese basing network from coming to fruition. Washington is using a combination of economic incentives and warnings to nations around the world that allowing Chinese-controlled ports will jeopardize U.S. security assistance.

Reflecting rising concerns on Capitol Hill, the latest defense authorization bill that President Biden signed into law requires the Pentagon to report by June on the national security dangers in Latin America. The report must examine whether Chinese investments in port projects and other infrastructure in Latin America and the Caribbean will assist the PLA in future naval operations or allow China to electronically spy on U.S. or host nation communications.

China’s state-owned port equipment company, Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries Co., has invested heavily in the Cuban port of Mariel over the past several years, adding four ship-to-shore gantry cranes. Plans call for adding up to two dozen more cranes in the coming years to significantly boost the port’s container capacity, according to Chinese state media.

Beijing is also expanding its influence in Panama. Chinese state-linked companies bracket both ends of the strategic Panama Canal. Critics fear the companies, in a time of crisis, could work with the PLA to shut down shipping in a vital chokepoint for the U.S. Navy.

In 2016, China bought control of Panama's largest port on the Atlantic at Margarita Island. In March, Panama's government began the renewal process for leases of the ports at either end of the canal, run by Hong Kong-based Hutchison Whampoa Ltd.

Around the globe

U.S. officials are also concerned about Beijing's apparent push for control of a number of European ports.

The push involves key ports in Greece. The state-run China Ocean Shipping Co. (Cosco), under the direct control of the Chinese Transport Ministry, holds the contract to run the Greek port of Piraeus. In 2017, two Chinese missile warships docked at the port, which is central to Beijing's effort to expand its power and influence in Europe.

Other major Chinese-government-linked ports in Europe include Cosco-run facilities in Zeebrugge, Belgium, and Valencia, Spain.

China's civilian ports could double as PLA naval supply bases in any major conflict, said Matthias Postl, a research associate with the Austrian military's defense academy.

Dual-use strategic bases are gaining ground because they offer peacetime logistics as well as intelligence and communications benefits, Mr. Postl wrote in a recent report published by the academy's Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management.

The 95 ports outside China, he wrote, are operated and partially owned by four main Chinese companies: China Ocean Shipping Co. (Cosco), Hutchison, China Merchants Port and China Merchant Port (Terminal Link), as well as smaller companies.

"These four big companies are world leaders in shipping and transportation and complement the PLA's otherwise quite limited overseas logistics capabilities, with access to select foreign ports to provide the necessary logistical support for naval operations in such distant waters," Mr. Postl wrote.

The ports include 31 in the Atlantic, 25 in the Indian Ocean, 21 in the Pacific and 16 in the Mediterranean. A total of 22 ports are located in Europe, 20 in the Middle East and 20 in Africa. Most are close to vital sea lanes, including the English Channel, the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Gibraltar and the Turkish Strait.

Chinese control over the ports could pave the way for PLA warships. Cosco, which runs eight European terminals, and China Merchants Port, which worked on the military base at Djibouti, are likely to allow easy access to the Chinese military.

Mr. Postl wrote that Cosco and China Merchants have participated in military-civilian exercises using roll-on/roll-off vessels built to PLA specifications.

In Asia, the PLA is setting up regional ports and bases in Cambodia at Ream Naval Base and throughout the South China Sea. Chinese military bases in the sea now include missile emplacements and military runways on rebuilt disputed islands.

For the Indian Ocean, the PLA plans to use Pakistan's recently built Gwadar Port and Sri Lanka's Hambantota International Port as bases to protect Middle East oil shipments, which are vital to China's economy, and to project power in that part of the world.

Australia's government is considering whether to cancel a 99-year lease it granted to China's Landbridge Group for the strategic northern port of Darwin in 2015. Landbridge denies posing a national security risk in running the port, which is close to a U.S. military base and is a logistics hub for U.S. and Australian forces that train together regularly.

Friction over the port has grown since China began using economic coercion against Australia — blocking access to Chinese markets — after the Australian government called for a renewed investigation into the Chinese origin of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Targeting ‘strategic strongpoints’

Before he became White House national security adviser, Jake Sullivan wrote in May 2020 that China is on the march and no longer can be considered a responsible partner in the U.S.-led international order.

“There is the campaign to control the crucial waterways off China’s coast, as well as reported plans to create a chain of bases and logistical facilities farther afield,” Mr. Sullivan said in a Foreign Affairs article co-written with Hal Brands, a scholar with the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

The two pointed to “systematic efforts” by Beijing to “refine methods of converting economic influence into economic coercion throughout the Asia-Pacific and beyond.”

Analysts point to a range of scenarios.

Isaac B. Kardon, an assistant professor at the Naval War College and a member of its China Maritime Studies Institute, said some of the 95 Chinese ports will be used as “strategic strongpoints” for the PLA to conduct sustained overseas military operations of increased complexity and duration.

The Chinese Communist Party, Mr. Kardon said, is pushing a program dubbed “military-civilian fusion,” which will help PLA forces use overseas terminals run by Chinese firms. “The plan depends on commercial ports to support its growing operations overseas,” he said.

Retired U.S. Navy Capt. Stu Cvrk said China is creating “hub-and-spoke” transportation infrastructure through ports and bases to facilitate access to strategic raw materials and natural resources to fuel its manufacturing and production. “The hub-and-spoke network seeks to control the world’s supply of rare earth elements and guarantees Chinese access to oil, gas, minerals, metals and other materials used in Chinese industries,” he said.

He added that China’s global economic initiatives provide cover for long-term objectives, specifically military expansion that could one day include PLA bases in Trieste, Italy; Lamu, Kenya; Eyl, Somalia; Eyl, Somalia; Bagamoyo, Tanzania; Bata, Equatorial Guinea; Tangier, Morocco; and El Hamdania, Algeria.

Capt. Cvrk said other Chinese ports and bases under consideration include Uganda’s Entebbe International Airport and port cities in Angola, Kenya, the Azores and Tanzania. “The PLA navy is expanding its ability to ‘protect’ Chinese commercial shipping routes, as well as its ability to conduct the U.S. equivalent of ‘presence missions,’” he said.

The Chinese ports are part of a larger strategy that includes ringing and neutralizing rival India, shifting the military balance in the Middle East from the United States to China and eventually providing strategic port encirclement of the United States, Capt. Cvrk said.

Retired Indian Army Col. Vinayak Bhat said the Chinese Communist Party ultimately seeks a dominant role in the world economy.

“The objectives of this policy are strongly supported by the PLA through their overseas bases, which are carefully chosen to control all strategic sea lanes of communication as well as road networks that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative,” Col. Bhat said.

“The PLA overseas bases,” he said, “are used as a tool to further the aims of [the] CCP to dominate and control the world.”

HEADLINE	01/04 Myanmar military attacks rebel hotspot
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/05/myanmar-20-civilians-reported-killed-in-latest-military-attack-in-rebel-hotspot
GIST	<p>Around 20 civilians have been killed and nearly 40 homes destroyed in a Myanmar village, according to local media, the latest in a series of massacres allegedly committed by the military.</p> <p>The victims of the attack in late December were found in the north-eastern Sagaing region, and included four men 60 or older, online news outlet Myanmar Now reported.</p> <p>The military seized power in a coup in February last year, creating a political crisis that has developed into a civil war marked by extreme brutality by security forces.</p> <p>Sagaing was one of the first areas where civilians rose up in armed rebellion after the military slaughtered hundreds of peaceful protesters. The region has seen armed clashes, multiple massacres and military airstrikes. According to Myanmar Now, the military occupied Natchaung village in late December, with resistance groups compiling a list of victims on 31 December.</p> <p>The year ended with a number of other violent incidents. The military allegedly massacred more than 30 civilians in Kayah State on Christmas Eve, near the border with Thailand, including women, children and two members of international humanitarian organisation Save the Children. While the United Nations called for a “thorough and transparent investigation into the incident”, state media dismissed the reports as a “plot ... drawn up based on their whims and fancies”.</p> <p>A spokesperson for the Kayah state police, a revolutionary force formed by officers who defected after the coup, said during a press conference that they had received missing person reports of 42 people, but have confirmed 31 deaths. A doctor said many of the bodies bore signs of torture.</p> <p>Fighting also broke out in Karen state in December after military forces entered territory controlled by an ethnic armed group sympathetic to the pro-democracy movement, arresting political dissidents in hiding. Thousands fled as fighting spread throughout the state, with many seeking refuge in Thailand, where an estimated 6,000 still remain with limited access to basic necessities.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/05 India: omicron fuels Covid third wave
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/05/omicron-fuels-india-third-wave-as-mumbai-prepares-for-tsunami-of-cases
GIST	<p>India is in the midst of a Covid third wave, officials have said, as the spread of Omicron has led to a doubling of cases in recent days and curfews being imposed on cities across the country.</p> <p>“India is clearly in the third wave of Covid-19, and the whole thing seems driven by Omicron,” said Dr N K Arora, chairman of the Covid-19 working group of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation, who cited the “galloping increase” of cases seen over the past week as evidence.</p> <p>Officially, India has detected 1,892 Omicron cases but Arora said that Omicron probably now accounted for around 50% of the new Covid cases in urban areas, overtaking Delta as the dominant variant. In Delhi, 84% of sequenced cases were found to be the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The highest concentration of Omicron cases are in Delhi and Mumbai and the mayor of Mumbai, Kishori Pednekar, said the city was preparing for a “tsunami” of cases. So far, the metropolis has registered almost 11,000 new cases and Pednekar warned that if it hit 20,000, they were likely to impose a lockdown.</p> <p>The central government has advised all states to reactivate their Covid war rooms and strengthen health infrastructure, particularly around oxygen supply and hospital bed capacity.</p>

In Delhi, 40% of hospital beds have now been reserved for Covid patients as the government announced a weekend curfew. Chief minister Arvind Kejriwal was among those who tested positive for the virus, a day after he had attended an election rally without a mask. The states of Punjab and Bihar have also imposed night curfews.

Soumya Swaminathan, chief scientist at the World Health Organisation, warned that “India could have a big surge. The next two weeks will tell us.”

Swaminathan warned people not to be complacent about the virus, which still had the potential to overwhelm India’s healthcare system, even if it was milder than the Delta variant, adding that it was “not the common cold”.

Arora was among those making assurances that the third wave was unlikely to be as brutal and devastating as the second wave which hit India in April, which pushed the healthcare system to collapse, led to a nationwide shortage of oxygen and overwhelmed crematoriums due to the scale of the dead.

He pointed to the situation in South Africa, where there were a high number of cases as Omicron spread quickly through communities, but where most cases were mild or asymptomatic. The wave has now almost died down after a month. India has a similarly young population to South Africa but has a higher vaccination rate.

“In view of this, we may see a somewhat similar pattern in India as far as the third wave is concerned,” Arora told Press Trust India. “Looking at the behaviour of the Covid infection in the last seven to 10 days in India, I feel that we may be in for a third wave peak very soon.”

In Goa, which had held off introducing any restrictions to avoid hurting the already beleaguered tourism industry, the state’s Directorate of Health Services said the third wave had hit the state on 28 December. Just days later, around New Year’s Eve, beaches in north Goa teemed with crowds of tens of thousands of people, leading to fears of a huge surge in cases in coming days.

Around 2,000 revellers who were on a New Year party cruise from Mumbai to Goa were held on the ship after 66 of them tested positive. Everyone on board was prevented from disembarking. After the boat was sent back to Mumbai, 27 of the passengers who were positive and refused to be taken to a quarantine facility still remain on the ship.

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HEADLINE	01/04 EU top diplomat visits Ukraine frontline
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/04/eu-top-diplomat-ukraine-frontline-show-solidarity-russia
GIST	<p>The European Union’s top diplomat is visiting the frontline of Ukraine’s war with Moscow-backed separatists, amid intensifying diplomatic activity in response to Russia’s buildup of troops on the country’s border.</p> <p>Josep Borrell, the EU foreign policy chief, began a two-day trip to Ukraine on Tuesday, before US-Russia talks in Geneva on 10 January and Nato-Russia talks on 12 January. Borrell is meeting Ukraine’s foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, during a trip intended to show solidarity with Kyiv, which aspires to join Nato and the EU.</p> <p>Tensions rose after Vladimir Putin last month set out security demands that Nato immediately rejected, including a veto on Ukraine entering the military alliance and a ban on troops and weapons along its eastern flank. The EU and US have accused Russia of stoking a crisis by massing tens of thousands of troops along its border with Ukraine.</p> <p>In an attempt to defuse tensions, Russian and US officials are to hold talks on 10 January in Geneva, where the US president, Joe Biden, and Putin met last year. Two days later, western countries will meet Russia in the Nato-Russia Council. Talks will continue on 13 January through the Organization for</p>

Security and Cooperation in Europe, a body that includes the US, its Nato allies, Russia and former Soviet states.

The EU is anxious not to be sidelined. “We do not want to be, and must not be, spectators that are not involved and over whose heads decisions are made,” Borrell told Die Welt last week, adding this was also the view of the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, with whom he had spoken before Christmas.

Borrell, who has been pushing for more EU military cooperation, said [Europe](#) had to be involved in the talks. “European security is our security. It is about us. Two parties, the US and Russia, or Nato and Russia, simply cannot negotiate about this – even if Moscow imagines it that way. We are not in the postwar period. There are some European states that are not Nato allies. There must be no Yalta 2,” he said referring to the second world war meeting of allied powers that accepted Soviet domination of eastern Europe.

More than 14,000 people have been killed in [Ukraine’s still-smouldering conflict with Russian-backed separatists](#) since 2014.

Ukraine’s ambassador to London, Vadym Prystaiko, called on western countries to announce preemptive sanctions against [Russia](#) to deter an attack, in contrast to the preference for reactive action. He suggested measures “that can be really painful to Russia” such as switching off its access to the Swift international payments system.

Speaking on BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, he said: “What Ukrainians are fearing the most” is that a “so-called big deal is baked somewhere behind our backs”. Western leaders, he said, should understand that Ukrainians have their own agenda. “The first item on this agenda is survival in the way we see it, to be close to western democracy.”

Tensions have also forced non-Nato member Finland to restate its right to choose its security policy. In a new year message Finland’s president, Sauli Niinistö, said his country retained the right to join Nato, a point reiterated by the prime minister, Sanna Marin. “Finland retains the option of Nato membership,” she said. “We should uphold this freedom of choice.”

Russia’s foreign ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, said last month that if Finland and Sweden joined Nato “this would have serious military and political consequences, which would require an adequate response on Russia’s part”.

Nato foreign ministers will hold a special meeting on Friday to discuss Russia’s military buildup and broader security issues, officials announced.

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HEADLINE	01/04 US prevails over Canada in dairy dispute
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-prevails-over-canada-in-dairy-dispute-11641318427?mod=hp_lista_pos3
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON—Canada will be forced to end tariffs on U.S. dairy products under a milestone decision Tuesday that could allow American dairy farmers to increase sales to Canada by more than \$200 million annually.</p> <p>The ruling came in the first-ever use of a new dispute resolution panel established by the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement. The U.S. contended that Canada used a complex set of tariff-rate quotas to reserve a share of the dairy market exclusively for Canadian dairy processors in violation of the 2020 pact.</p> <p>“Today’s decision is an important victory for U.S. dairy farmers,” said Jim Mulhern, the president of the National Milk Producers Federation. “The United States and Canada negotiated specific market access terms covering a wide variety of dairy products, but instead of playing by those mutually agreed upon rules, Canada ignored its commitments.”</p>

Canada didn't commit to a specific course of action but acknowledged the Feb. 3 deadline to resolve the matter. In a joint statement, Canada's ministers of trade and agriculture said they "continue to stand up for its dairy industry, farmers and workers and the communities they support."

If Canada doesn't come into compliance by the deadline, the U.S. could begin the process of initiating tariffs or other countermeasures.

Although Canada said aspects of the ruling were in its favor, the panel's report contained only one ultimate finding—that Canada's practices were inconsistent with its obligations in the trade deal.

"This is a big deal because it gives credibility to a recent trade agreement at a time when the current administration has expressed doubts about the benefits of trade agreements and has not initiated any new negotiations," said Jessica Wasserman, a longtime Washington trade attorney and partner at WassermanRowe LLC.

The Trump administration filed an initial complaint about Canada's dairy quotas in December 2020, leading to discussions between the two nations but no resolution.

In May of 2021, the U.S. escalated that complaint and triggered the dispute resolution process of the USMCA for the first time. The three-member dispute resolution panel was chaired by Elbio Rosselli, a diplomat from Uruguay, under USMCA rules to ensure that panelists are independent and have expertise in international law and trade treaties.

Canadian dairy had been omitted from 1994's North American Free Trade Agreement, the precursor to the USMCA.

"This historic win will help eliminate unjustified trade restrictions on American dairy products, and will ensure that the U.S. dairy industry and its workers get the full benefit of the USMCA to market and sell U.S. products to Canadian consumers," said U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai, the Biden administration's top trade negotiator.

Rep. Kevin Brady (R., Texas), the Republican leader of the House Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction over trade deals, applauded the USTR.

"I commend USTR for using USMCA's new enforcement mechanism to achieve this important result," he said. "Canada must now do the right thing and come into full compliance with its obligations on dairy."

Canada's dairy producers have long fought against opening their market. The country has around 11,000 commercial farms that hold substantial political sway because they are located in a politically important region: rural central Canada, especially French-speaking Quebec.

To protect those interests, Canada uses a quota system it calls supply management. Supporters say the system helps to stabilize prices and domestic capacity of a nutritional necessity.

The U.S. also has a long history of stabilizing and supporting its domestic dairy industry via a complex set of subsidies and regulations controlling the price. Dairy proved to be one of the most difficult issues during the final stage of negotiations between the U.S. and Canada over the trade deal.

The U.S. industry has long argued that Canada's practices go too far, and almost immediately after the USMCA went into effect, voiced concerns that Canada was violating the deal.

Even with the restrictions in place, Canada is typically the No. 2 market for U.S. dairy exports, after Mexico, so further opening of its market could be a win for U.S. producers. According to the International Trade Commission, the USMCA—if implemented as negotiated—would boost U.S. dairy exports to Canada by \$227 million.

	Dairy exports to Canada have climbed by about \$56 million, compared with when the USMCA took effect, according to Trade Data Monitor, which compiles global import and export data.
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HEADLINE	01/04 New Jersey pulls out port-crime watchdog
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-jersey-says-it-is-leaving-port-crime-watchdog-11641340192?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	<p>New Jersey is pulling out of its decadeslong partnership with New York state to fight organized crime on the waterfront.</p> <p>The administration of New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, sent letters to Congress and to New York on Dec. 27, formally declaring the state's intent to withdraw from the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor, which regulates hiring at the Port of New York and New Jersey.</p> <p>The commission was set up by the two states almost 70 years ago to fight corruption and violence tied to port labor operations, events that were the subject of the 1954 movie "On the Waterfront." In recent decades it has also sought to add diversity in waterfront fields dominated by a white, male workforce.</p> <p>New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, has 90 days from Dec. 27 to challenge the withdrawal before New Jersey, acting under its own state law, withdraws from the commission. Representatives for Ms. Hochul didn't respond to requests for comment.</p> <p>Mr. Murphy and New Jersey legislators say the commission has outlived its usefulness and needlessly complicates hiring and operations at the large container terminals in Newark, Elizabeth and Bayonne, N.J., where most of the port's cargo activity takes place. They are supported by the International Longshoremen's Association, the union representing the port's dockworkers, and the New York Shipping Association, which represents operators of the port's container terminals.</p> <p>New Jersey has said that state police should monitor the docks because the majority of commerce under the agency's oversight takes place in New Jersey.</p> <p>The Port of New York and New Jersey is the busiest gateway for container imports on the East Coast. The two states operate the port together through the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which also controls the region's major airports and some tolled bridges and tunnels. The Waterfront Commission is independent of the Port Authority.</p> <p>The commission still regularly suspends longshoremen and denies or revokes workers' licenses because of criminal wrongdoing or for associating with organized crime.</p> <p>The U.S. attorney's office for the Southern District of New York, in a June letter to the U.S. Justice Department viewed by The Wall Street Journal, said organized crime "remains a significant threat in the New York metropolitan area, particularly in the ports in New York and New Jersey." The office praised the commission for its intelligence gathering and investigative assistance in prosecutions.</p> <p>New Jersey signaled its plans to withdraw from the commission three years ago, when then- Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, on his last day in office signed a law triggering the process.</p> <p>The commission sued Mr. Murphy to prevent New Jersey from withdrawing and a federal court found the law signed by Mr. Christie unconstitutional. But an appeals court later ruled that New Jersey's sovereign immunity shielded Mr. Murphy from the suit and, in November, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review the case.</p> <p>That leaves New York as the final potential roadblock to New Jersey's withdrawal. The state could sue New Jersey in the U.S. Supreme Court. A representative for Ms. Hochul said in November that the administration was reviewing its options.</p>

	<p>New York state Assemblywoman Amy Paulin, a Democrat who chairs a committee that oversees public authorities, said she was concerned that without the commission, organized crime and unfair hiring could proliferate.</p> <p>She said she was also worried that allowing New Jersey to withdraw unilaterally from a bistate compact sets a precedent that could haunt the states in the future if one party chooses to withdraw from another bistate agency, such as the Port Authority.</p> <p>Ms. Paulin sent a letter to Ms. Hochul on Nov. 22 outlining her concerns. She said she hasn't received a response.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/05 Japan, Australia to sign defense treaty
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-china-tensions-smoulder-japan-and-australia-move-to-sign-defense-treaty-11641370418?mod=hp_listb_pos1
GIST	<p>Japan and Australia plan to sign a treaty on Thursday that will allow their militaries to work more closely together, in the latest example of U.S. allies strengthening ties to counter the rising threat from China.</p> <p>The treaty signing is a centerpiece of a virtual summit between Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his Australian counterpart, Scott Morrison.</p> <p>The agreement makes Australia the second country to have a formal defense pact with Japan covering entry of soldiers into Japan, after the U.S. As China increases its military might, Washington and its allies are deepening cooperation. At the core of that effort is a four-country group known as the Quad that also includes India and has stepped up joint military exercises in recent months, also bringing in European and other countries.</p> <p>"Based on the principle of a free and open Indo-Pacific, I want to raise cooperation with the U.S., Australia and India and build close ties with their leaders through close consultations," Mr. Kishida said Tuesday.</p> <p>Japan and Australia said in late 2020 they would seek to remove legal and administrative barriers to their militaries entering each other's countries, allowing for more joint training and quick military support in a crisis.</p> <p>The formal treaty means troops from one country can freely enter the other country for exercises, and vice versa, without having to negotiate terms each time.</p> <p>Japan and the U.S. have a similar agreement, which allows American military personnel to travel directly in and out of U.S. bases in Japan without immigration or health screening. That arrangement has been in the spotlight in recent days because of clusters of Covid-19 infections at U.S. military bases in Japan, where the infection rate among the general population remains very low. U.S. military personnel are now required to have a negative Covid-19 test within 72 hours of travel to Japan and quarantine for 14 days on arrival.</p> <p>Australia has been working to overhaul its military to create a larger, more powerful force and forge deeper ties with like-minded countries. In September, Australia created a new security partnership with the U.S. and U.K.—known as AUKUS—that Mr. Morrison said was a response to a worsening security environment in the Indo-Pacific region. Central to the AUKUS agreement is the sharing of nuclear-powered submarine technology.</p>

Relations between Australia and China have worsened in recent years, after Australia made allegations of Chinese interference in its politics and banned Huawei Technologies Co. from involvement in its [rollout of 5G telecommunications infrastructure](#).

In 2020, [China imposed steep tariffs](#) on Australian barley, suspended beef imports from some Australian slaughterhouses, and slapped antidumping tariffs on Australian wine, among other trade penalties, after Mr. Morrison called for an investigation into the origins of the virus that caused the Covid-19 pandemic. The U.S. labeled China's pressure tactics as economic coercion.

Defense experts say Australia and Japan want to show they can play a larger role in deterring Beijing and, by doing so, keep the U.S. engaged in the Indo-Pacific.

Still, both countries are mindful that America's commitment to the region could waver in future, said Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a government-backed security think tank. If it did, then the Japan-Australia relationship would become more critical to maintaining security in the region, he said.

The treaty could result in significant numbers of Japanese defense personnel training with their Australian counterparts and U.S. Marines in Darwin, said Mr. Jennings.

"We will definitely see a lift in cooperation both in scale and speed quite quickly, and that does just reflect the times we are in," he said.

Mr. Morrison said cooperation with Japan includes a broader agenda for the Quad, which China has dismissed as a small clique harboring a Cold War mentality.

At the virtual summit, the leaders of Japan and Australia will also look at ways to deepen government and business collaboration on clean energy as well as critical materials and technologies, Mr. Morrison said.

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HEADLINE	01/04 OSINT: Russia military buildup near Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-military-buildup-near-ukraine-is-an-open-secret-11641292202?mod=hp_listb_pos2
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON—Russia faces a very 21st century challenge as it piles up forces near Ukraine's border: Much of its military operation is being carried out in plain sight.</p> <p>Taking on a role once reserved for spies, amateur sleuths and analysts with private and nongovernmental organizations are tracking Russia's buildup day by day, mining commercial satellite images, social-media posts and flight-tracking data to compile a strikingly precise picture of Moscow's deployments—and of the U.S. military's efforts to monitor them.</p> <p>Satellite photos taken by commercial satellite and imaging company Maxar Technologies Inc., for example, have turned up an array of new units in western Russia and Crimea. In December, images revealed more than 350 vehicles parked at an abandoned ammunition storage facility near the Russian town of Klinty, just north of the Ukraine border.</p> <p>"It is almost like they are freeze-dried units," said a Maxar analyst. "Just add troops and the units are ready to move!"</p> <p>The use of open-source intelligence, or OSINT, isn't new. What has changed, according to former officials and analysts, is wider and cheaper access to more data, allowing private citizens to track the Russia-Ukraine confrontation and provide the public with details that once would have been classified. That, in turn, has allowed the Biden administration to speak in greater detail publicly about the buildup, they said.</p>

In response, Russia's military, which is practiced in the use of camouflage and deception, has taken steps to try to disguise its ultimate intentions by removing license plates from military vehicles, painting over insignia and operating in smaller units, the analysts and former officials said.

For all the details about the buildup, analysts both in the U.S. government and outside it don't know whether Russia will attack, and if so, how and where.

"The Russian military is conducting a buildup that is inherently visible, but it is doing it deliberately and slowly in a way that is intended to retain operational surprise," said Michael Kofman, an authority on Russia's armed forces at CNA Corp.

"They move forces back and forth so you can't know for certain where these troops will end up until very late in the game when there's precious little time to react," Mr. Kofman said. "Ukraine would not necessarily know where they plan to attack, which is the feint and which is the real vector."

Officials with Russia's Defense Ministry and presidential administration didn't respond to a request for comment.

"Open-source satellite imagery has helped shine a spotlight on Russia's troop movements," a spokesperson for the White House National Security Council said. "We have also sought to leverage the unique analytic expertise of the intelligence community" to share information and insights with allies, partners and the broader public.

Open-source intelligence once largely referred to the monitoring of press reports around the world by the U.S. and other governments. The term now encompasses a wider array of material including social media, posts on web forums, satellite imagery and commercially available data culled from smartphones that can divulge reams of personal information, including precise location details.

Russia is gathering a force that the U.S. government says already numbers about 100,000 troops and might grow to as many as 175,000. The private analysts have compiled videos from social media and other sources of Russian military road convoys and trains, and used satellite images to watch as individual units gather in encampments.

The ability to monitor the current buildup is much greater than it was in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and invaded parts of eastern Ukraine, said Jeffrey Edmonds, a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst who was the senior Ukraine specialist at the National Security Council early that year.

Combining commercial satellite images and [Twitter](#) posts allows private experts to be "roughly on the same page" as the U.S. intelligence community, said Mr. Edmonds, also at CNA Corp. "It's impressive how close someone can be on the outside."

U.S. officials said in late December that Russia has deployed 53 battalion tactical groups, each with about 800 troops, near its border with Ukraine.

Konrad Muzyka, president of Rochan Consulting, a Gdansk, Poland-based firm that conducts open-source intelligence assessments focused on Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, said he has identified and located about 48 Russian battalion tactical groups. "I'm just five behind. And I'm doing only open source," Mr. Muzyka said.

Armchair sleuths using flight-tracking data last week followed the flight paths of U.S. RC-135 and E-8 reconnaissance planes over Ukraine.

For the E-8 aircraft, which use powerful radar to monitor enemy ground movements, the Dec. 27 flight was the first time the plane had operated in Ukrainian airspace, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Russ Wolfkiel, a U.S. European Command spokesman, said. A second E-8 flight took place three days later.

“Of course, we are aware of the various technology that allows our activities to be publicly monitored,” Lt Cmdr. Wolfkiel said. “We are transparent about the fact that we conduct these types of flights with European allies and partners routinely.”

U.S. officials have said they are keeping a close eye on Russia’s forces, and that President Biden [will respond to an invasion with stiff economic sanctions](#), additional defense aid to Ukraine and by reinforcing positions on the territory of NATO’s Eastern European nations.

Russian officials have denied plans to invade Ukraine and said that the government has the right to deploy forces on Russian territory. Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) has also said that he is prepared to carry out “military technical measures,” if the West continues what he called its “aggressive line.”

Open-source intelligence analysts said Russian deployments north of Ukraine appear to be significant, as they are not positioned for a response to attacks the Russian military says Ukrainian forces are preparing to carry out in the Donbas region in southeastern Ukraine. Moscow-backed separatists have been fighting Ukrainian forces in that area since 2014.

In addition to the “freeze-dried units” near Klinty, Maxar photos show new deployments near the Russian towns of Kursk, Valuyki and Dorogobuzh, and the central Crimean town of Bakhchysarai. Near the town of Yelnya, north of the Ukraine border, images show a sizable buildup of forces from Russia’s 41st Army, far from its home garrison in Siberia, analysts said.

The Russians were less vigilant in trying to conceal their activities when they moved into Crimea in 2014 and during an earlier buildup of forces near Ukraine in spring 2021, the analysts and former officials said.

“What we’re seeing is maybe the Russians have learned from some of the operational security mistakes they made in the spring,” said Thomas Bullock, an open-source intelligence specialist at defense analyst Janes.

Mr. Bullock said the Russian armed forces have started removing from vehicles license plates that can identify their region of origin and painting over tactical insignia on military equipment. That practice was also documented by the Conflict Intelligence Team, or [CIT](#), a group of Russian bloggers.

Mr. Muzyka said that his and some other analysts’ access to a Russian website used to track the movement of train cars has apparently been blocked by Russia and, in the last two weeks, the site has begun reporting bogus data about train movements. “It’s becoming worse and worse,” he said of efforts to gather open-source intelligence.

The large-scale exercise that Russian forces conducted near Ukraine in the spring, analysts said, may have been an effort to inure observers to the presence of Russian troops in the region so they would have trouble telling the difference between training and war preparations.

Dara Massicot, an expert on the Russian military at Rand Corp., said the spring exercise gave Russia an opportunity to practice deployment, gauge the response and [leave forces near Ukraine for use later](#).

Mr. Putin in May 2020 issued a decree banning members of Russia’s armed forces from carrying devices such as smartphones and tablets that can transmit locations and photographs while on duty.

While observers detected some social media and smartphone activities from service members in the spring, “We are not seeing as much of that right now,” Ms. Massicot said.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Prices of Covid-19 test kits rising
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/walmart-kroger-raise-prices-of-covid-19-test-kits-11641320476?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos5

Prices are going up for some of the cheapest and most popular at-home Covid-19 test kits in the U.S.

[Walmart](#) Inc. and [Kroger](#) Co. are raising their prices for BinaxNOW at-home rapid tests, after the expiration of a deal with the White House to sell the test kits at cost for \$14.

The two U.S. retail giants and [Amazon.com](#) Inc. agreed with the Biden administration last summer to discount the tests, which are made by [Abbott Laboratories](#) and generally cost \$24 or more for a box with two tests.

BinaxNOW, approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, is [among the most commonly used](#) over-the-counter, rapid antigen tests, which have been in high demand as [the highly contagious Omicron variant](#) spreads across the U.S.

The deal with the White House expired in December, and Walmart said this week that it is raising the kits' price to \$19.98 a box. Kroger now sells them for \$23.99. The BinaxNOW tests aren't currently available on Amazon.

Representatives for Walmart and Kroger said they fulfilled their commitment to sell tests at cost for three months and are taking steps to make tests more available. The White House didn't respond to a request for comment.

An Amazon spokeswoman said the company is working with suppliers to alleviate shortages. She said Amazon made a large investment to develop its own FDA approved PCR test, which sells for \$39.99, lower than most similar tests. The effort, she said, involved setting up an in-house laboratory to process results.

Pharmacy chains [CVS Health](#) Corp. and Walgreens Boots-Alliance Inc., along with other big retailers, [have been selling the tests](#) for \$23.99 a box. Other retailers already are charging even more.

Even at the higher prices, tests are difficult to find. BinaxNOW is sold out on many major retailers' websites or takes more than a week to arrive. A Walmart spokeswoman said the BinaxNOW tests are more readily available in physical stores.

Abbott said it is running plants around the clock, seven days a week to pump out 70 million tests a month. "Despite rising U.S. material and labor costs, we have not passed along any of these costs to our customers and the price at retail has not changed since we launched the test," the company said.

Covid-19 tests—both [at-home kits](#) and those done on location in clinics or at drugstores—remain costly and difficult to find in many places as the Omicron-driven surge [pushes many Americans to seek out the diagnostic tools](#). The Biden administration has said it is working to expand access to free testing and has pledged [to distribute 500 million free at-home tests](#). Some cities and states have established similar programs.

The White House said last month that [it would begin delivering at-home tests in January](#) and that they would be available to the public free by mail through a new website. Officials haven't provided details of the plans to mail out tests or to cover the costs of testing.

The cost and availability of tests varies widely. BinaxNOW tests are hard to find online for \$24 but can be purchased for twice the price. At-home PCR tests are more readily available but generally cost close to \$100 for a single test. Other rapid tests approved by the FDA for home use include the Ellume Covid-19 Home Test and the QuickVue test made by Quidel.

Free testing is generally offered at medical and community clinics and at retail pharmacies. In places where demand for testing is especially high, people face hours-long lines or scarce appointment slots. How much people pay for in-person tests varies based on a number of factors including whether a person is insured, if they are symptomatic and how quickly they want results.

“When the prices are that high, people will rationalize not using a kit. They’ll wait until they’re sick or need it for school or something,” said Eric Feigl-Ding, an epidemiologist and health economist and a senior fellow at the Washington, D.C.-based Federation of American Scientists. “The problem with this pricing, besides creating a lack of access, is that it creates a perverse incentive for people not to use them.”

The tests need to be free or cost closer to \$1, as is the case in much of Europe, to be an effective tool, Dr. Feigl-Ding said. That is because people who have few or no symptoms [can still spread the virus](#).

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HEADLINE	01/04 Kazakhstan state of emergency: protests
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/world/europe/kazakhstan-emergency-protests-fuel.html
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — The president of Kazakhstan declared a two-week state of emergency in two regions of the Central Asian country early Wednesday after nationwide protests erupted over rising fuel prices.</p> <p>In Almaty, the country’s largest city, police fired tear gas and stun grenades at crowds of thousands of people who had refused to disperse, as protesters set police cars alight, according to wire services.</p> <p>The protests, which began on Sunday, represent a rare manifestation of dissent in Kazakhstan, an oil-rich authoritarian country in Central Asia.</p> <p>“Dear compatriots, I urge you to show prudence and not succumb to provocations from within and from without, to the euphoria of rallies and permissiveness,” President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said in a video address Tuesday evening. “Calls to attack civilian and military offices are completely illegal. This is a crime that comes with a punishment.”</p> <p>Early on Wednesday, Mr. Tokayev announced the resignation of the Kazakh government on the president’s website. He has no political opposition in Parliament.</p> <p>The state of emergency includes an 11 p.m.-to-7 a.m. curfew; restrictions on movement, including curbing entry to and exiting from the city of Almaty; and a ban on mass gatherings, according to a document published on the president’s website. Public protests without a permit are illegal.</p> <p>The declaration was made after several days of growing protests over the rise in prices for liquefied petroleum gas, or L.P.G., a low-carbon fuel that many Kazakhs use to power their cars. The government has argued that the price caps were financially unsustainable and lifted them effective Jan. 1. The turn to the free market essentially doubled the cost of the fuel overnight.</p> <p>The protests began on Sunday in the southwestern oil town of Zhanozen, the same place where 16 striking oil workers were killed in 2011 by police after they demanded improved working conditions. (Human rights experts estimate the number of casualties could be several times higher.)</p> <p>In Aktau, the capital of the resource-rich Mangystau region, 16,000 people protested Tuesday, according to the Russian news agency Interfax, while 10,000 gathered in Zhanozen.</p> <p>In his speech, Mr. Tokayev said the government would again cap the L.P.G. price at 50 tenge (\$0.11) per liter, less than half the current market price. But he also said no dissent would be brooked, urging young people “not to spoil their paths in life” and “not to poison the lives of loved ones.”</p> <p>Access to mobile internet was down and messaging apps including WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram were blocked.</p> <p>Kazakhstan is the world’s largest landlocked country, bigger than the whole of Western Europe, with a population of about 19 million. Its gross domestic product per capita in 2020 was just above \$9,000, according to the World Bank.</p>

Mr. Tokayev, who became president in 2019, is widely perceived as the handpicked successor of Nursultan Nazarbayev, a former Communist Party boss who had run Kazakhstan since its independence from the Soviet Union. The 81-year old Mr. Nazarbayev still wields tremendous power, holding the title “Leader of the Nation” and serving as chairman of the country’s Security Council.

By Tuesday, it was evident the demonstrators had moved beyond the fuel prices to demanding the removal of Mr. Nazarbayev from public life. In Aktau, protesters were shouting “Old man out!”

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HEADLINE	0104 Brooklyn gang alliance: wave of violence
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/nyregion/brooklyn-gang-deadly-shooting-charged.html
GIST	<p>Seventeen teenagers and young adults who the authorities say belonged to three street gangs that formed an alliance in Brooklyn were charged on Tuesday with unleashing a wave of violence that left four people dead and 10 others wounded in shootings.</p> <p>The gangs, made up of young people from the Brownsville, East New York and Fort Greene neighborhoods, joined forces in an “umbrella” gang known as YPF to expand their territory and increase their access to guns, Eric Gonzalez, the Brooklyn district attorney, said.</p> <p>The young men and women, ages 17 to 23, face charges that include second-degree murder, assault and criminal weapon possession. A spokesman for Mr. Gonzalez said that 14 of them were in custody on Tuesday and would be arraigned later in the day. It was unclear whether any of those charged had lawyers as of Tuesday evening.</p> <p>“I’m going to tell you that we know that law enforcement by itself can’t end gang and gun violence,” Mr. Gonzalez said at a news conference on Tuesday. “But today’s indictments are a big step in getting justice for the victims and improving public safety.”</p> <p>Mayor Eric Adams, who also appeared at the news conference, said that the kind of takedown that resulted in the arrests should be duplicated across New York City.</p> <p>“We’re not going to live in a culture of violence and we won’t be defined by the crisis of violence,” he said. “That is not who we are as a city. We deserve better, and today, the district attorney showed us that we’re going to get better.”</p> <p>Mr. Gonzalez said the authorities were trying to crack down on “senseless gang and gun violence.” He announced last week that homicides and shootings in the borough had declined in 2021 from the year before and he cited gang takedowns as one reason for the drop.</p> <p>Law enforcement experts and civil rights advocates have long taken issue with the anti-gang tactics used by law enforcement agencies in New York. These critics say the police often rely on unreliable information in carrying out such actions, classifying too many young men of color as gang members.</p> <p>Mr. Gonzalez has previously said that gang takedowns done for the sake of appearing tough on crime are meaningless and destructive and that they ignore the main reason people join gangs: for protection.</p> <p>But he has also said the tactic can be useful when the authorities focus on people who engage in violence.</p> <p>“These investigations are complicated, they’re challenging, but they’re effective and they are necessary,” he said on Tuesday.</p> <p>Mr. Gonzalez said a “disturbing aspect” of the case announced on Tuesday was the ages of those who were charged. When the investigation began in March 2019, some were as young as 14.</p>

“That is heartbreaking that some of our youngest residents in our county are involved in this gang and gun violence,” he said.

Investigators said the gang members had decided to form the larger alliance under the YPF banner to increase their numbers and geographic dominance, and to expand the territory where they could travel safely.

“As part of this alliance, they all agreed to adopt the rivalries and the enemies of the other gangs,” Mr. Gonzalez said. “So this alliance not only brought these three gangs together and created one bigger gang, but it also increased the amount of violence.”

He said the alliance was behind more than a dozen shootings, including one at MetroTech Center in Downtown Brooklyn in September that resulted in a New York University student being shot in the arm.

At the news conference, officials showed surveillance video from an October 2020 episode that they said showed two alliance members firing shots inside a bodega in East New York.

Sherard McKoy, [an 18-year-old college freshman](#) who officials said did not have gang ties, was killed in the shooting. Mr. Gonzalez said that although Mr. McKoy was not the intended target, he was with an alleged rival of the two gunmen.

“He was an 18-year-old college student, a freshman,” Mr. Gonzalez said. “A young man who enjoyed playing basketball and had ambitions of being a New York City schoolteacher.”

Daijyonna Long, 20, of Virginia, was another victim of the alliance’s coordinated attacks on their rivals, officials said. Ms. Long [died after being shot at a birthday party in Brooklyn](#) that the authorities said alliance members showed up to uninvited.

Surveillance video shown at the news conference captured what officials said were two alliance members and two other people opening fire in the apartment building lobby where the party took place.

“She never made it back home to Virginia,” Mr. Gonzalez said of Ms. Long.

Five of those charged face life sentences if convicted of the most serious charges, Mr. Gonzalez said; others face up to 25 years in prison.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Release deal ends Palestinian hunger strike
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/world/middleeast/palestinian-hunger-strike-israel.html
GIST	<p>BEER YAAKOV, Israel — In the five-bed intensive care unit of a hospital in central Israel, ventilators and machines beeped and hummed. But there was a hushed quiet around Hisham Abu Hawash’s bed and the vital signs monitor above him was silent.</p> <p>He had refused any medical intervention, including the machines that can monitor his declining health, and rejected food, intravenous fluids or supplements.</p> <p>Mr. Abu Hawash, 40, was in his 141st day of a hunger strike, the latest Palestinian prisoner to take drastic measures to protest his open-ended detention by Israeli military authorities without charge or trial, a practice called administrative detention.</p> <p>On Tuesday night his protest came to an end with sips from a cup of tea after Israeli and Palestinian officials reached a deal to release him next month. After days of protests calling for his release and mounting fears in Israel of widespread unrest if he died in custody, the government capitulated.</p> <p>According to the deal, Mr. Abu Hawash will remain in the hospital until Feb. 26 and begin receiving medical care. The Palestinian Authority agreed “to guarantee he will not return to terrorism.”</p>

Under the rules of administrative detention, Mr. Abu Hawash had never been charged with terrorism, much less convicted. His lawyers insist he is innocent.

A West Bank construction worker and father of five, Mr. Abu Hawash had become gaunt and frail by the time his hunger strike ended.

He slipped in and out of consciousness and his family, lawyers and medical aid groups warned that his death was imminent. Every few hours his wife, Aisha Hirbat, 31, roused him to try to give him a few sips of water. Sometimes he was unable to swallow and the water dribbled out of his open mouth.

Israel has used administrative detention to imprison thousands of Palestinians from the occupied territories since 1967, detaining them under military law for open-ended terms based on secret evidence. With no charges and no way to defend against them, lawyers can only petition the courts for their clients' release.

Hunger strikes are not an uncommon response, though Mr. Abu Hawash's was one of the longest in recent years.

Israel does not regularly release official numbers but the prisoner-rights group Addameer estimates that there are 500 Palestinians currently in administrative detention, including four minors.

Israeli officials did not respond to questions about the use of administrative detention, but they have said previously that it is used as a preventive tool to save lives, not as a punitive measure for actions already taken. They say that the intelligence is kept secret to protect sources.

Israel is not alone in the practice. Authoritarian countries like Egypt and China use it routinely, as does the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

According to a defense official familiar with Mr. Abu Hawash's case, he was accused of being a West Bank operative for Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a militant group based in Gaza.

Israel's internal security service, the Shin Bet, said he was involved in plans to attack Israeli civilians and soldiers, the official said. The official did not provide any evidence to support the accusation, or say whether any of the attacks were carried out.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad is considered a terrorist organization by many countries, including Israel and the United States, and has carried out numerous deadly attacks against Israeli civilians.

Mr. Hawash's family and lawyers denied that he was a member of the group and called on the military court to present its evidence supporting the allegations against him.

"Of course they haven't given us any evidence to prove their allegations, because this is all secret," said one of his lawyers, Ahmed Safiya.

International humanitarian law permits occupying powers to use administrative detention as a temporary measure when a detainee presents a clear and serious threat to society, according to Omar Shakir, the Israel and Palestine director for Human Rights Watch. But he says Israel's use of the practice goes beyond the accepted legal basis.

"Israel's overbroad use of it, 54 years into an occupation, locking up hundreds of people with secret evidence clearly goes beyond what international law authorizes," he said. "It makes a mockery of basic due process."

There have been international calls for Israel to end the practice. Michael Lynk, the United Nations rights expert monitoring the occupied territories, has called it “an anathema in any democratic society that follows the rule of law.”

When he began his hunger strike, Mr. Abu Hawash weighed about 175 pounds, his family said. For months, he consumed only water and 3 grams each of salt and sugar a day, but stopped taking the sugar and salt about six weeks ago, his wife, Ms. Hirbat, said.

He now weighs less than 85 pounds. His ribs and pelvic bones jut out from a sunken stomach.

Mr. Abu Hawash, from the town of Dura, near Hebron, has spent more than seven years behind bars in the past two decades, more than half of it without charge, according to a prisoner’s rights group, the Palestinian Prisoners Club.

After his first arrest, in 2004, he spent three years in prison after pleading guilty to charges including attempting to intentionally cause death, dealing in military equipment and helping fugitives by reporting on Israeli military movements, according to the Israeli military.

In prison, he shared a wing with Islamic Jihad members, his brother Imad Abu Hawash said. Mr. Abu Hawash became friends with them but did not join the group, his brother said.

After his release, the Israeli official said, he “continued with serious terrorist activity” and was detained again in 2008 for about nine months.

During this detention, he asked Ms. Hirbat, a Dura neighbor, to marry him.

“He was afraid that I would marry someone else and that he would miss his opportunity,” she said Sunday in the I.C.U. waiting room of Shamir Medical Center in Beer Yaakov, near Tel Aviv. “I didn’t even think twice about it. I said yes.”

They married soon after he was released.

Ms. Hirbat said she didn’t know much about his previous involvement with Palestinian resistance groups but that once they married his focus was on working long hours in construction to support his growing family.

In 2012, he was placed in administrative detention again, this time for 26 months. The Israeli official said he had been “involved in building and strengthening the terrorist infrastructure” and “promoted the purchase of weapons.”

He was arrested again in October 2020, because “he was involved in significant terrorist activity, endangering the security of the region and public safety,” the Israeli official said.

When he began his hunger strike last Aug. 17, Ms. Hirbat said she tried to persuade him not to.

“He refused,” she said, explaining, “‘If I don’t do this I won’t get out for another two or three years.’”

A major motivation to resort to drastic measures to end his detention was his 6-year-old son, Izzedine, who suffers from kidney atrophy. Before his imprisonment, Mr. Abu Hawash’s brother said, he was working long hours to pay for his son’s operations.

Izzedine has had two operations at an Israeli hospital since his father’s hunger strike began. A third operation is on hold as his father clings to life.

As his condition has deteriorated, his case has become a rallying cause for Palestinians chafing under Israeli occupation.

At a protest in Gaza on Monday night, Khaled al-Batsh, a senior Islamic Jihad leader, said that if Mr. Abu Hawash died, his group would consider it an Israeli assassination and would retaliate.

Israeli officials were concerned that his death could touch off civil unrest.

If Mr. Abu Hawash died in custody, said Aida Touma-Sliman, a Palestinian member of Parliament from Hadash party, “they know that the West Bank will ignite and there will be pressure from the international community.”

Mr. Abu Hawash’s detention was suspended on Dec. 26 by a military court, which determined that because of his failing health he no longer posed a danger to the state, according to Israel’s prison service. That night he was transferred from a prison infirmary to the civilian hospital.

But he was still not free and not allowed to leave the hospital. Nor was his family allowed to transfer him to a Palestinian hospital in the West Bank, as they have said they wanted to do.

A guard is stationed outside his room.

Ms. Hirbat has been staying at the hospital for more than a week, sleeping next to her husband’s bed. When she is occasionally ushered out of the room as hospital staff treat other critical patients, she dons fuzzy blue slippers and waits nervously outside.

She said her husband had vowed to continue his hunger strike until he was free, and he repeatedly warned his family not to allow doctors to feed him intravenously no matter his condition.

“Hisham is going to continue whether it is martyrdom or victory,” Ms. Hirbat said. “Even if it’s martyrdom it will be a victory, because he did not capitulate to them.”

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HEADLINE	01/04 Canada Indigenous children settlement
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/world/canada/canada-indigenous-children-settlement.html
GIST	<p>The Canadian government announced Tuesday that it had reached what it called the largest settlement in Canada’s history, paying \$31.5 billion to fix the nation’s discriminatory child welfare system and compensate the Indigenous people harmed by it.</p> <p>The agreement in principle forms the basis for a final settlement of several lawsuits brought by First Nations groups against the Canadian government. Of the overall settlement, 40 billion in Canadian dollars, half will go toward compensating both children who were unnecessarily removed, and their families and caregivers, over the past three decades.</p> <p>The rest of the money will go toward repairing the child welfare system for First Nations children — who are statistically far more likely to be removed from their families — over the next five years to ensure families are able to stay together.</p> <p>“First Nations from across Canada have had to work very hard for this day to provide redress for monumental wrongs against First Nation children, wrongs fueled by an inherently biased system,” said Cindy Woodhouse, the Manitoba regional chief at the Assembly of First Nations, the largest Indigenous organization in Canada.</p> <p>“This wasn’t and isn’t about parenting. It’s in fact about poverty,” she said at a news conference, adding that more than 200,000 children and Indigenous families are affected by the agreement.</p>

The deal is an acknowledgment that the child welfare system was better resourced to remove children than to support them in place. The system was the product of discriminatory policies put in place and enforced over generations against Indigenous communities.

Of those eligible for compensation, experts hired during the litigation have estimated that 115,000 children were separated from their families since 1991, said Robert Kugler, a lawyer who represented First Nations complainants on two different lawsuits, during the news conference.

While less than 8 percent of children under 14 in Canada are Indigenous, they make up more than 52 percent of those in foster care, according to 2016 census [data](#).

The case was first brought to the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal back in 2007, by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, a child welfare advocacy group, and the country's largest Indigenous organization, the Assembly of First Nations.

They claimed First Nations children on reserves and in one northern territory were discriminated against, because the government didn't fund their child welfare and family support services at the same rate as it did for non-Indigenous children. By 2004, reports showed there were three times the numbers of First Nations children in state care than during the height of residential schools, when Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families.

The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, a quasi-judicial federal body that adjudicates complaints of discrimination, concurred, and [ruled](#) in 2016 that the government must reform its child and family services programs for First Nations. This included changes to the formula used to calculate funding allocations for government services on reserves, according to the tribunal [decision](#).

But the federal government stalled, repeatedly appealing to have the case dismissed on technical grounds and failing to implement meaningful change. Over the past five years, the federal tribunal has issued around 20 noncompliance orders, according to one lawyer with the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society.

In the meantime, other First Nations groups filed class action lawsuits against the government on similar grounds.

"Canada could have settled this case for hundreds of millions of dollars back in 2000, when we raised the alarm that First Nations kids were getting 70 cents on the dollar compared to other kids," said Cindy Blackstock, the executive director of the organization that initiated the case and a professor of social work at McGill University in Montreal.

"But Canada chose not to do that," Ms. Blackstock added. "And now we are into the tens of billions of dollars and most importantly, children have lost their lives and sometimes their childhoods in the process." In November, the respected Indigenous judge and former senator [Murray Sinclair](#) was enlisted to help negotiate a settlement out of court.

"This is the largest settlement in Canadian history," said Marc Miller, Canada's minister of crown-Indigenous relations, at a news conference in Ottawa on Tuesday. "But no amount of money can reverse the harms experienced by First Nations children."

The precise settlement terms for compensation and future child welfare reforms are still being negotiated, the government wrote in a [statement](#), though funding to help youth who are aging out of the child care system will be distributed as early as the spring.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's political opponents criticized his government's tactics in the child welfare lawsuit during last summer's federal election campaign. Jagmeet Singh, leader of the New Democratic Party, characterized the legal battle as Mr. Trudeau's government "taking Indigenous kids to court."

	<p>Canada has been grappling with its colonial legacy since 2015, when the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission deemed that the historic removal of Indigenous children from their families over a century, when they were sent to residential schools, amounted to "cultural genocide." The commission issued dozens of calls to action, the first of which was to reduce the number of Indigenous children in state care.</p> <p>Last year, the discoveries of hundreds of unmarked graves at the sites of two of those former schools added emotional urgency to the reckoning, including calls to abandon Canada Day celebrations.</p> <p>An estimated 150,000 Indigenous children attended the boarding schools, the last of which closed in 1996, where hundreds died. Many were physically and sexually abused.</p> <p>Tuesday's settlement is the second multi-billion-dollar compensation agreement with Indigenous communities to be announced by the federal government in recent weeks. In December, the Federal Court of Canada approved a \$6.3 billion lawsuit against the government over years of contaminated drinking water on Indigenous reserves.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 OPEC, Russia agree to increase oil output
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/business/opec-oil-output.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&module=&state=default&region=footer&context=breakout link back to briefing
GIST	<p>Officials from OPEC, Russia and other oil producers agreed on Tuesday to continue their program of gradual monthly output increases in February, bolstering output by 400,000 barrels a day, but there are growing doubts about whether they can deliver on the additional barrels.</p> <p>A persistent failure to step up production according to a schedule approved in July is helping to keep oil prices relatively high, even though a surge in coronavirus cases from the Omicron variant threatens to dampen economic activity and oil demand.</p> <p>A few producers in the 23-member OPEC Plus group, including Saudi Arabia and Iraq, are increasing output handily, but others are lagging. A range of issues, including political strife and underinvestment in drilling, are holding them back.</p> <p>The slow ramp up in production could lead to tension with the Biden administration, which wants the producers to pump more oil in an effort to lower gasoline prices in the United States. Gas prices, nationally at \$3.28 a gallon, are now about one-third higher than they were a year ago, according to the Energy Information Administration, a government agency, and contributing to rising inflation.</p> <p>What Saudi Arabia decides to do is crucial. The most logical route to meeting the scheduled increases in output would be for Saudi Arabia, which now has most of the world's extra capacity, to agree to produce more than its quota.</p> <p>At this point, the dynamics in the oil market are working for the benefit of producers like Saudi Arabia who have kept investing in their energy industries. Reflecting Saudi interests in avoiding overproduction, a statement released after Tuesday's meeting mentioned "the critical importance of adhering to full conformity" on quotas. There was no sign of concern about producing less than those allocations.</p> <p>Saudi Arabia, the leader of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, has much to be pleased about. Saudi production is back around the 10-million-barrel-a-day level that the kingdom prefers, prices are relatively high, and Riyadh's influence over oil policy is strong.</p> <p>"If they didn't have to deal with Washington, this would be a very optimal outcome," said Helima Croft, head of commodities at RBC Capital Markets, an investment bank, speaking of large OPEC producers.</p>

In November, [the White House coordinated a planned release](#) of strategic oil reserves with other nations in an effort to dampen the market, but prices have since edged up, and continued to rise on Tuesday. Brent crude, the international benchmark, was once again selling for more than \$80 a barrel, while West Texas Intermediate, the American standard, topped \$77 a barrel.

In the spring of 2020, the early days of the pandemic, OPEC Plus sharply curbed production by almost 10 million barrels a day, or almost 10 percent of world supply at the time.

Building output back up again has not been easy for several countries, including Nigeria and Angola.

In its December Monthly Oil Report, the International Energy Agency estimated that OPEC Plus fell short of its November target by 650,000 barrels a day, substantially more than the 400,000 barrels a day the group had planned to increase each month.

Even Russia, the group's second-largest exporter after Saudi Arabia, appears to have hit a wall at about 9.9 million barrels a day, about 600,000 less than it pumped in April 2020 before the big cuts and well short of Russia's 10.2 million barrel a day allocation for next month. Saudi Arabia has the same quota. For Russia to increase substantially from here will require improved tax policies and the development of new fields, analysts say.

"Russia is temporarily near its limits," said Bhushan Bahree, an executive director at IHS Markit, a research firm.

Nigeria, Africa's largest producer, in November pumped 360,000 barrels a day below its quota — almost enough on its own to wipe out the agreed 400,000-barrel-a-day monthly increase for the overall group. "A poor regulatory framework, sabotage and vandalization of oil facilities" are deterring needed spending in Nigeria, the International Energy Agency said in its report.

Angola, another African country, is also pumping well under its quota, while Libyan production has recently fallen off rapidly because of political turmoil.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Used car prices rising faster than bitcoin
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/jan/4/used-car-prices-rising-faster-bitcoin-2022-begins/
GIST	<p>Used car prices have skyrocketed and are accumulating value more quickly than Bitcoin, according to industry insiders.</p> <p>A global shortage of semiconductor chips and pandemic-fueled declines in automotive use has boosted the value of used cars by thousands of dollars, says Hans Dau, a supply chain analyst and CEO of the Mitchell Madison Group business consulting firm.</p> <p>"The spike in used car prices might be the only truly transitory piece of the inflation picture in the economy today," Mr. Dau said. "COVID threw a monkey wrench into chip manufacturers' planning process, as people stayed home and reduced chip production was allocated to consumer electronics."</p> <p>What's more, market researcher Jim Bianco told CNBC's "Trading Nation" on Thursday that the Manheim Index of Used Car Prices showed the price of used cars rising more than 20% during the last four months of 2021 while Bitcoin itself rose only 5%.</p> <p>The latest Manheim Index on Dec. 15 was 239.8, reflecting a 48.9% increase in the average used car price in the United States from December 2020.</p> <p>Wholesale used car prices rose 3.1% in the U.S. during the first two weeks of December compared to November, according to Manheim.</p>

And the automotive inventory information website Edmunds.com said the average price of a used car in the U.S. was \$29,011 in November, a 39% increase from 12 months earlier, The Associated Press reported Monday.

A woman in Omaha, Nebraska, paid \$7,500 for a 2013 Toyota Scion with 160,000 miles on it in November to replace a car that had been totaled in a crash, according to the AP.

David Sacco, who teaches finance at the University of New Haven, said the pandemic has had a roller-coaster effect on supply and demand across the economy.

“First, demand went down significantly due to people staying home and some losing their jobs,” said Mr. Sacco, a cryptocurrency expert. “Demand then rapidly increased due to direct stimulus payments and increased personal saving during the early stages of the pandemic.”

Car buyers also are dealing with surcharges slapped on some of the most popular automobiles, including SUVs, pickup trucks and sports cars.

The so-called market adjustments to the manufacturer’s suggested retail price (MSRP) have added \$5,000 to \$10,000 to a car’s final price, with some consumers reporting markups as high as \$20,000.

Automotive website iSeeCars.com found that the average used car price was 11.4% above MSRP, while new car prices were more than 20% higher.

“There is no indication that this is moderating or lessening,” said Karl Brauer, a senior analyst at iSeeCars.

But Mr. Dau said drivers who hope to profit by selling their old cars should act fast: Since more than 60% of the world’s semiconductor chips come from Taiwan, he expects the issue “will work itself out in short order.”

“I view the car chip shortage as a sign of the success of the free market,” he said. “With many workers working from home, would you rather have a laptop and a new iPhone or more cars?”

Financial pundit Charles Mizrahi said the skyrocketing used car prices will end only when the high demand for cars does. Exactly when that happens, he added, will be anyone’s guess.

“Simply put, used car prices will continue to move higher until there are more cars to choose from,” Mr. Mizrahi said. “If you need a car to get to and from work, and the price is higher by \$1,000, what’s your alternative? Until more supply enters the market, this is going to continue.”

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HEADLINE	01/04 Omicron hot spots hospitals not ICUs fill up
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/health/covid-omicron-hospitalizations.html
GIST	<p>In hospitals around the country, doctors are taking notice: This wave of Covid seems different from the last one.</p> <p>Once again, as they face the highly contagious Omicron variant, medical personnel are exhausted and are contracting the virus themselves. And the numbers of patients entering hospitals with the variant are surging to staggering levels, filling up badly needed beds, delaying nonemergency procedures and increasing the risk that vulnerable uninfected patients will catch the virus.</p> <p>But in Omicron hot spots from New York to Florida to Texas, a smaller proportion of those patients are landing in intensive care units or requiring mechanical ventilation, doctors said. And many — roughly 50 to 65 percent of admissions in some New York hospitals — show up at the hospital for other ailments and then test positive for the virus.</p>

“We are seeing an increase in the number of hospitalizations,” said Dr. Rahul Sharma, emergency physician in chief for NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell hospital. But the severity of the disease looks different from previous waves, he said. “We’re not sending as many patients to the I.C.U., we’re not intubating as many patients, and actually, most of our patients that are coming to the emergency department that do test positive are actually being discharged.”

Though it’s still early for firm predictions, the shift in hospital patterns fits with emerging data that Omicron may be a variant with inherently milder effects than those that have come before, less prone to [infecting the lungs](#), where it can cause serious disease. But the lower proportion of severe cases is also happening because, compared with previous variants, Omicron is infecting more people who have some prior immunity, whether through prior infection or vaccination. The vast majority of Omicron patients in I.C.U.s are unvaccinated or have severely compromised immune systems, doctors said.

Hospitals, facing staff shortages, are under enormous strain. In New York City, hospitalizations have [exceeded the peak](#) of last winter’s surge. And Governor Larry Hogan of Maryland [declared a state of emergency](#) on Tuesday, noting that the state had more hospitalized Covid-19 patients at that time than at any previous point during the pandemic.

“We’re in truly crushed mode,” said Dr. Gabe Kelen, director of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine’s emergency department.

The number of I.C.U. patients is a lagging indicator, likely to rise in the coming weeks, experts said. What’s more, some states are still struggling under the crush of hospitalizations from Delta, a previous version of the virus that may be more virulent. (Hospitals are frequently in the dark about which variant newly admitted patients are infected with.)

Still, several reports suggest that Omicron is a foe different from the variants that came before. And the challenges hospitals face — at least so far — are less about stockpiling equipment and more about staffing and contagion, doctors said.

“Early on in the pandemic, we were worried about running out of *things*, like ventilators,” said Dr. Ryan Maves, an infectious disease and critical care physician at the Wake Forest School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, N.C. “Now, the real limitations are obviously physical bed space, but even more so, it’s staffing.”

When reports emerged in early December that hospitals in South Africa were handling [relatively few severe Omicron cases](#), experts stressed that the findings should be interpreted with caution. South Africa has a relatively young population, and a large proportion had been infected by previous waves, leaving the affected people with some pre-existing immunity.

But now that the virus has spread across the world and the United States, there is more evidence that many people who have been infected with Omicron in recent weeks seem to be faring better than those who were infected with other variants or during earlier surges.

In Britain, people with Omicron were about [half as likely to require hospital care](#) and one-third as likely to be admitted to the hospital from emergency rooms as those infected with Delta, according to [a government report](#) released last week. Early reports from Canada suggest a similar pattern.

And a [new report from](#) the Houston Methodist health care system, which has been sequencing the vast majority of viral samples from its patients since February 2020, found broadly the same thing.

By Dec. 20, the new variant was causing more than 90 percent of new Covid cases at Houston Methodist. In the new analysis, researchers compared 1,313 symptomatic patients who had been infected with Omicron by that date to Houston Methodist patients who had been infected with the Delta or Alpha variants beginning earlier in the pandemic.

The numbers of Omicron cases examined in Houston are small, and it takes time for the worst outcomes to manifest. But fewer than 15 percent of those early Omicron patients were hospitalized, compared with 43 percent of the Delta patients and 55 percent of the Alpha patients, the study found.

Among those who were admitted, Omicron patients were also less likely to require mechanical ventilation and had shorter hospital stays than did those infected with the other variants.

“On average — and I’m stressing on average — the Omicron cases are less severe,” said Dr. James Musser, the chair of pathology and genomic medicine at Houston Methodist, who led the research. He added, “And that’s obviously good news for our patients.”

The Omicron patients were also younger, and more likely to be vaccinated, than were those with previous variants, which may partially account for the milder illness.

Although the reports are encouraging, it is still too early, and there is not yet enough detailed data, to draw firm conclusions about Omicron’s inherent severity, said Natalie Dean, a biostatistician at Emory University in Atlanta.

“There hasn’t been really quite enough time,” Dr. Dean said. It took months for numerous large studies of Delta’s hospitalization risks to appear.

In New York City, cases have been steadily rising since December and are now [overwhelmingly accounted for by Omicron](#). Covid hospitalizations have also increased sharply, and I.C.U. admissions [have been rising](#) more slowly.

At New York University’s Langone Health, for example, around 65 percent of patients admitted with Covid were “incidentally” found to have the virus, and their hospitalizations were not primarily because of the illness. At New York-Presbyterian, just under half of Covid admissions were incidental.

Hospitals in other cities have also been reporting higher rates of incidental infections. Across Jackson Health System hospitals in Florida, [53 percent](#) of the 471 patients with Covid were admitted to the hospital primarily for other reasons. At Johns Hopkins Medicine in Maryland, 20 percent of patients seeking treatment for non-Covid complaints are testing positive for infections, said Dr. Kelen of Johns Hopkins.

Incidental infections can still pose [significant risks](#) for people who are hospitalized for other health problems. And the high number of hospitalized patients with asymptomatic Covid presents an additional challenge for infection control.

“You still need to put them in isolation,” said Dr. Carlos del Rio, an infectious disease specialist at the Emory University School of Medicine. “You still need to treat them as patients who could potentially transmit Covid in the hospital. And when you have less staff, then you really have a problem.”

At NYU Langone, intensive care admissions are 58 percent lower among people hospitalized for Covid than they were in January 2021, said a spokeswoman, Lisa Greiner. At Mount Sinai South Nassau, doctors are also seeing fewer patients requiring critical care compared with previous peaks, but the sheer number of cases means that there are higher numbers of people getting very sick than in recent months.

“I would say on the whole, the illness is less severe,” said Dr. Aaron Glatt, chief of infectious diseases and epidemiologist at the hospital. But, he added, “We have had deaths from Covid, which we haven’t seen in a long time. And we’re seeing patients in the I.C.U. and on ventilators, which we haven’t had in a long time.”

The majority of people who are going into I.C.U.s are unvaccinated or are vaccinated people who are in higher risk groups, experts said. And among people who make it into I.C.U.s, cases can still be as severe as with prior variants.

	<p>The increase in hospitalizations has put further stress on overburdened hospitals.</p> <p>Many hospitals were already struggling with staffing shortages before Omicron emerged. Even when hospital beds are available, an exodus of health care professionals over the course of the pandemic has made it more difficult to deliver care.</p> <p>“There’s just no capacity,” said Dr. Megan Ranney, an emergency physician and the academic dean of Brown University’s School of Public Health. “There’s not adequate staff for the beds that exist.”</p> <p>The rise in hospitalized Covid cases has happened alongside a rise in hospitalizations for other conditions, said Dr. Sharma of NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell, putting further strain on hospitals. At the peak of the pandemic in 2020, those admissions plummeted as people without Covid avoided hospitals.</p> <p>“People aren’t scared to come to the hospitals like they were in 2020. Our volumes in our E.R.s are almost back to, if not above, prepandemic numbers,” Dr. Sharma said. “That means that we’re busy — capacity becomes an increased challenge.”</p> <p>The staff shortages are leading many hospitals to consider reducing elective surgeries.</p> <p>“We’re never going to crowd out strokes, and we’re never going to crowd out heart attacks,” said Ed Jimenez, chief executive of the University of Florida Health Shands hospital system. “But if this keeps going the way it’s going, we’re going to have hospitals that have to start considering slowing down their planned admissions.”</p> <p>At Grady Hospital in Atlanta, “we’re hoping not to cancel elective surgeries, but we’ve considered it,” Dr. del Rio said. “The reality is that we’re finding that some of these elective surgeries are canceling themselves because people are coming in and testing positive for Covid.”</p> <p>It has been about six weeks since the world first learned about Omicron, and hospital personnel are still waiting nervously to see how the coming weeks unfold.</p> <p>As of Tuesday morning, Houston Methodist had 630 inpatients with the virus across its eight hospitals, Dr. Musser said, the vast majority of whom most likely have Omicron. That figure remains below the system’s Delta peak — in which there were between 850 and 900 inpatients with the virus at once — but the numbers of new cases are still rising, he said.</p> <p>“How high will it go?” he said. “Can’t tell you. Don’t know. We’re all watching it, obviously, very, very closely.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Chicago cancels classes; clash w/teachers
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#chicago-cancels-classes-as-teachers-resist-returning-to-school
GIST	<p>Public school officials in Chicago canceled classes for Wednesday amid a clash with the teachers’ union, whose members had threatened to stay home in a bid to force instruction online during a coronavirus surge.</p> <p>Union members had criticized the district’s response to the Omicron variant, which has pushed cases in the city to record levels, and said conditions in classrooms were unsafe. The Chicago Teachers Union said late Tuesday night that 73 percent of members who voted favored pausing in-person instruction.</p> <p>But Mayor Lori Lightfoot said reverting to online schooling was unacceptable and unnecessary, and her administration decided to call off class altogether — keeping the buildings open for emergency child care — rather than return to virtual instruction.</p>

“Nobody signs up for being a home-schooler at the last minute,” Ms. Lightfoot said. “We can’t forget about how disruptive that remote process is to individual parents who have to work, who can’t afford the luxury of staying home.”

Ms. Lightfoot, a Democrat, urged teachers to report to work and suggested they were considering an illegal work stoppage.

As highly contagious Omicron rears its head, so do debates that were considered settled. After a relatively calm fall, when school administrators, unions and families largely agreed that remote schooling was a nonstarter, the brinkmanship between the third-largest U.S. district and its union exposes just how quickly that political consensus can fall away.

Like other school systems, Chicago has had to confront a shortage of tests, and a far from universal vaccination rate among students. There have been large numbers of staff members calling in sick, and widespread anxiety among just about everyone. Other districts, including in Cleveland, Milwaukee and Atlanta, have also gone online temporarily, but without a public labor dispute. The ongoing chaos has unnerved parents who are desperate for some kind of stability.

Coronavirus cases have skyrocketed in Chicago to their highest rate since the pandemic began. But as in the rest of the country, vaccinated adults have had lower rates of hospitalization and death, while children of all ages — regardless of vaccination status — have overwhelmingly been spared severe outcomes.

In addition, data from Chicago and elsewhere shows that in-school transmission of the coronavirus has been limited, with a majority of teacher and student cases originating outside school buildings. More than 90 percent of Chicago Public Schools employees are fully vaccinated.

Still, members of the powerful Chicago Teachers Union have accused the school district of failing to adjust to Omicron, and the growing threat of breakthrough infections. During the holiday break, they had asked for either universal P.C.R. testing of students and staff or a two-week transition to remote learning.

“We are between a rock and a hard place — the rock being the pandemic, the hard place being an intractable, incompetent mayor,” Stacy Davis Gates, the union’s vice president, said this week. She added, “We said a two-week pause so they could get themselves together, have the proper communication, put in the necessary mitigations.”

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HEADLINE	01/04 Texas: 40% National Guard refuse vaccine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#a-lawsuit-filed-by-texas-governor-reveals-that-many-of-the-states-army-national-guard-refused-vaccines
GIST	<p>A lawsuit filed by Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas on Tuesday challenging the Biden administration’s military vaccine mandate revealed that thousands of members of the Texas Army National Guard had refused to receive Covid vaccinations.</p> <p>The suit, filed in U.S. District Court for the Eastern Division of Texas, seeks to prevent unvaccinated National Guard members from being penalized or discharged. It comes as Mr. Abbott has called up thousands of members of the Texas Military Department, which includes the National Guard, to join in border security operations.</p> <p>The filing notes that about 40 percent of the state’s Army National Guard have not been vaccinated “for either religious accommodation needs or otherwise.”</p> <p>No indication of the size of that force is evident on the Texas Army National Guard’s website, but Stars & Stripes, the newspaper of the U.S. armed forces, said that a 2018 Texas Military Department report put the number at about 18,160. Forty percent of that would be more than 7,000 people.</p>

The suit indicated that less than 10 percent of the Texas Air National Guard were unvaccinated. It said that “more than 220” members had declined to be vaccinated in a force that the 2018 report put at more than 3,000.

Mr. Abbott, who is facing reelection this year, has barred mask and vaccine mandates within Texas and has mounted a strong fight against federal mandates. The state lags the national average in Covid vaccinations, with about 57 percent of the population fully vaccinated, and its Covid hospitalizations have risen 87 percent over the past two weeks as cases have exploded there, [according to a New York Times database](#).

[The suit](#) was the latest effort by a Republican-led state government to prevent the federal mandate for their National Guards, arguing that it impinges on their command over state troops.

In mid-December, the [governors of Alaska, Wyoming, Iowa, Mississippi and Nebraska](#) — all Republicans — asked the defense secretary, Lloyd J. Austin III, for exemptions. At the end of December, a federal judge [rejected a legal challenge to the federal mandate filed by the governor of Oklahoma](#), Kevin Stitt, also a Republican.

Mr. Austin, who was also named in Mr. Abbott’s suit, has repeatedly affirmed that the mandate applies to the National Guard. On Sunday, after he announced on Twitter that he had tested positive for the coronavirus, he added that the vaccination would “remain a military medical requirement for our workforce,” which he said “remains a readiness issue.”

[In a letter on Tuesday](#) to Maj. Gen. Tracy R. Norris, the commander of the Texas Military Department, Mr. Abbott described his intent to fight the federal mandate, but also forecast possible defeat.

“I cannot guarantee that the judiciary will grant the relief you deserve,” he wrote, adding, “Win or lose, President Biden must be held accountable for his unconscionable willingness to hollow out the Texas National Guard. Please know that I am grateful for your service and will continue fighting on your behalf.”

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HEADLINE	01/04 Britain PM: ‘ride out’ Omicron wave
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#britain-omicron-boris-johnson
GIST	<p>Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain on Tuesday said that despite the record surge in coronavirus cases, the limited restrictions currently in place in England were the right approach and would be maintained.</p> <p>“We have a chance to ride out this Omicron wave without shutting down our country once again,” Mr. Johnson said at an evening news conference, adding, “We can keep our schools and businesses open, and we can find a way to live with this virus.”</p> <p>The prime minister said he would urge the cabinet to carry on with the current coronavirus contingency measures, called “Plan B,” which were introduced in early December as the Omicron wave took hold. They include masking mandates, guidance to work from home and the use of vaccine passports, but they fall short of the stricter lockdown measures some opposition lawmakers and scientists had called for.</p> <p>“I do think the balance of measures that we have is the right one,” Mr. Johnson said. He said he believed there was a “good chance” of getting through the wave without further restrictions.</p> <p>As Mr. Johnson’s government has pushed for the Britain to remain open in recent weeks, a surge in coronavirus cases driven by the highly transmissible Omicron variant has added to the pressure to shut down. On Tuesday, some 218,000 new coronavirus cases were reported, and hospitalizations have continued to rise.</p>

Absences at a number of hospitals across England have left a number of facilities critically short of staff, field hospitals have been set up to deal with an overflow of patients, and public transportation has been hit with shutdowns as workers called in sick.

Mr. Johnson acknowledged that the weeks ahead would be challenging. But he pointed to support being given to key industries and said he believed the staff shortages would be far less disruptive than a lockdown. He said the government has identified 100,000 critical workers who will be offered daily virus tests to help keep essential services open.

Schools in England reopened on Tuesday with new measures, including extended masking requirements and testing. Recently retired teachers were being asked to return to cover absences. And as England's national health service moved to a "war footing," the government was working to identify hospitals most likely to need military support.

Despite the rise in cases, there were some glimmers of good news.

England's chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, said on Tuesday that new data showed that a booster shot gives a person around 88 percent protection against hospitalization, and that protection was likely to be even greater when it came to mortality.

Earlier in the day, Neil Ferguson, an epidemiologist at Imperial College London, said that he was "cautiously optimistic" that coronavirus infection rates in London in the key 18 to 50 age group that has been driving the Omicron outbreak "may possibly have plateaued."

Professor Ferguson told the BBC that it was too early to say whether new infections were going down, but the growth in some areas had slowed. He cautioned, however, that it could be weeks before the full impact of social mixing over Christmas was known. Holiday socializing may prove especially risky for older populations, he said.

"Hospitalizations are still generally going up across the country and we may see high levels for some weeks," Professor Ferguson said, adding that the numbers are still far below levels seen during a peak last year.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Govt. doubles order for Pfizer Covid pills
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#paxlovid-covid-pill
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The United States government doubled its order for Pfizer's Covid pills on Tuesday, a move that will modestly increase the nation's very limited supply of the treatment in the short term amid a record-setting surge in coronavirus cases.</p> <p>The new order will eventually provide enough pills for an additional 10 million Americans, bringing the government's total order of the drug to 20 million treatment courses. But they will not all be available right away. Only 35,000 of the additional courses will be delivered this month, and 50,000 more in February, supplementing 350,000 treatment courses that were already expected over the next two months, according to a senior administration official.</p> <p>The order underscored how urgently health providers need alternatives to vaccines, as roughly 35 million adults remain without a shot and more vulnerable to severe outcomes from Covid. Tens of millions more have been vaccinated but have risk factors that also make them especially vulnerable.</p> <p>The new order also suggests that the federal pandemic response will increasingly rely on oral treatments, which are scarce and facing intense demand.</p> <p>"We may need even more," President Biden said on Tuesday, announcing the move ahead of a Covid briefing he was set to receive from health advisers. "That's the estimate we need right now."</p>

The government has agreed to pay Pfizer \$530 for each treatment course, the same amount it paid for its [initial order late last year](#), the senior official said.

Monthly deliveries of the Pfizer treatment, known as Paxlovid, are not expected to ramp up into the millions until April, too late to help with the current surge. The combined order is not due to be completely filled until the end of September.

Still, Mr. Biden described the doubled order as a key component of the federal government's Covid strategy. "They're a game-changer," he said, "and have the potential to dramatically alter" the course of the pandemic.

Paxlovid was [authorized two weeks ago](#) for use in high-risk Covid patients age 12 or older. Pfizer expects to produce 120 million courses of it in 2022 for all global buyers. The treatment has proved in clinical trials to be highly effective in staving off severe illness when taken soon after the start of symptoms.

Pfizer's treatment is meant to be taken as 30 pills over five days, with patients taking three pills at a time: two of Pfizer's pills and one of a low-dose H.I.V. drug known as ritonavir, which helps Pfizer's drug remain active in the body longer.

But public health experts have warned that [without an adequate testing supply](#) — [a problem in many parts of the country](#) — it could be difficult to quickly get the pills to those most in need.

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HEADLINE	01/04 CDC modifies Pfizer booster shot guidance
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#pfizer-booster-shot-cdc
GIST	<p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended on Tuesday that Americans who received two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine seek a booster shot five months after the second shot, and not wait six months, as earlier guidance had said.</p> <p>The agency also recommended that some immunocompromised children ages 5 to 11 receive an additional primary vaccine shot 28 days after the second shot, matching the guidance for similar people 12 and older. Pfizer's vaccine is the only one authorized for pediatric use in the United States.</p> <p>The endorsements come on the heels of the authorization of the same steps by the Food and Drug Administration on Monday.</p> <p>The F.D.A. also cleared 12- to 15-year-olds to receive boosters of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. The C.D.C.'s vaccine advisory committee is set to meet Wednesday to discuss whether to recommend that step.</p> <p>The C.D.C. and the F.D.A. share responsibility for setting the nation's vaccine policy, and have worked to present a unified front in their reviews of booster shots. If the advisory committee does follow the F.D.A.'s lead, the C.D.C.'s director, Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, is expected to quickly sign off on the recommendation.</p> <p>The moves come at a time when the fast-spreading Omicron variant is infecting record numbers of Americans each day, and many hospitals in the United States are already deluged with Covid-19 patients with the earlier Delta variant.</p> <p>Federal guidance has not changed for when to seek booster shots after initially receiving the Moderna vaccine (6 months after the second shot) or the Johnson & Johnson vaccine (2 months after the single shot).</p>

	<p>More than 70 percent of people in the United States who are 12 or older have been fully vaccinated, according to the C.D.C.</p> <p>In total, at least 1.9 million adolescents between 12 and 15 have tested positive for the virus, according to the C.D.C. Children who get infected with the coronavirus are less likely to develop serious illness than adults are, but they can still become very sick and even die.</p> <p>The F.D.A. noted that data from Israel showed no serious safety concerns in thousands of 12- to 15-year-olds who received a third dose of the Pfizer vaccine. There were no reports of myocarditis, a very rare side effect linked to the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines that has been seen mostly in younger men. The condition involves inflammation of muscle tissue in the heart.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Macy requests vax status all US employees
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#macys-vaccine-mandates
GIST	<p>Macy's began requesting the vaccination statuses of employees on Tuesday, a sign it was preparing for a potential mandate of vaccinations or weekly testing ahead of a special Supreme Court hearing about such rules on Friday.</p> <p>In a memo sent to employees that was obtained by The New York Times, the retailer — which also owns Bloomingdale's and Bluemercury — told workers in the United States to upload their vaccination statuses to a third-party platform by Jan. 16 “regardless of whether you work in a store, a supply chain facility, an office, or are remote/hybrid.” For employees who say they are unvaccinated, Macy's said it would “review your submission and you may be contacted by someone from the Colleague Advisory team to discuss next steps.” The company also said it might require proof of negative tests to be uploaded to the same system starting on Feb. 16.</p> <p>The Supreme Court is scheduled to hold the hearing this week to assess the legality of two measures from the Biden administration: a vaccine-or-testing mandate aimed at large employers and a vaccination requirement for certain health care workers. The retail industry had pushed back on a new rule issued in November by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration requiring companies with 100 or more workers to mandate vaccines or weekly tests, saying it could intensify a labor shortage that many retailers were dealing with during the busy holiday season.</p> <p>Since then, the Omicron variant has sent global coronavirus cases to record levels, though recent data shows that people infected with it are far less likely to be hospitalized than those infected with the Delta variant, especially if they are vaccinated.</p> <p>Macy's said separately on Tuesday that it planned to shorten store hours from Monday through Thursday for the rest of January amid the spike and staffing shortages. The news was reported earlier by CNBC.</p> <p>The National Retail Federation, a major industry lobbying group, said in a statement on Tuesday that it “continues to believe that OSHA exceeded its authority in promulgating its vaccine mandate, and we look forward to making that argument before the Supreme Court on Friday.” The group estimated that the order would require 20 million tests a week nationally, based on external data on unvaccinated workers, and that “such testing capacity currently does not exist.” Still, the memo from Macy's, which has tens of thousands of employees, suggests that the industry is preparing to carry out the rule. Macy's also said in its memo that it would adopt the new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that recommended shortening isolation periods for infected people to five days from 10 if they are asymptomatic or their symptoms are resolving.</p> <p>The retailer asked in the fall that its corporate staff either be vaccinated or test negative for Covid-19 before returning to the office, but it did not make the same request of store employees.</p>

	When asked about the memo, a Macy's representative said in an email that the retailer was "working to comply with federal and local guidelines related to Covid."
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HEADLINE	01/04 NYC mayor defends pandemic response
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#nyc-schools-adams
GIST	<p>In his first big test as mayor of New York City, Eric Adams is resisting pressure from municipal unions and elected officials to do more to stop the spread of the coronavirus as cases and hospitalizations are surging.</p> <p>Mr. Adams is holding firm that schools must stay open, and he is urging employers to have employees return to their offices, despite calls from some union leaders to temporarily return to virtual learning and remote work.</p> <p>With coronavirus cases rising rapidly in recent days, a small but growing list of public school districts around the country — including Newark, Atlanta, Milwaukee and Cleveland — have moved temporarily to remote learning. On Monday night, Philadelphia's school district announced that 81 schools, out of 216, would go remote.</p> <p>In an interview on CNN on Tuesday morning, Mr. Adams defended his decision to reopen schools, even though roughly a third of parents did not send their children back to classrooms on Monday for the start of the semester. He continued to argue that students were safer at school.</p> <p>"I'm not going to allow the hysteria to prevent the future of my children receiving a quality education," Mr. Adams said on CNN.</p> <p>On Tuesday, President Biden, citing the lack of evidence that Omicron more severely impacts children, called for schools to remain open in the United States. Local officials should use federal funds from the stimulus package passed last year to improve ventilation systems in schools and support classrooms large enough for social distancing, he said.</p> <p>"We have no reason to think at this point that Omicron is worse for children than previous variants," Mr. Biden said. "We know that our kids can be safe when in school."</p> <p>Mr. Adams, a Democrat who was sworn in on Saturday just after the New Year's Eve ball dropped in Times Square, also urged companies not to allow employees to work remotely, echoing a message he conveyed Monday on Bloomberg TV: "You can't run New York City from home."</p> <p>Mr. Adams insisted on Tuesday that he was not at war with the teachers' union and its president, Michael Mulgrew, who had called for a temporary return to remote learning.</p> <p>"There's no battle between Michael Mulgrew and Eric Adams," Mr. Adams said, adding that they speak three times a day and were working together to keep classrooms safe.</p> <p>Mr. Adams has repeatedly argued that city schools must stay open and that poor children in particular suffered from remote learning. He recently announced, alongside his predecessor and the governor, a plan to distribute millions of rapid at-home tests to schools and increase random surveillance testing among students.</p> <p>New York City reported nearly 30,000 new virus cases on Monday, and the number of people hospitalized has surpassed 5,000, according to state data. That level exceeds last winter's peak, but is still below the hospitalization rate during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, when 12,000 people were hospitalized on the worst days.</p> <p>There are long lines outside testing centers, as has been the case for weeks, and many private companies have said their employees should continue to work from home.</p>

Some public officials have called for more aggressive measures to stop the spread of the virus, including Mark D. Levine, the new Manhattan borough president who has become a leading voice in amplifying the views of health experts.

Mr. Levine released a 16-point plan on Monday that [called on the city to encourage New Yorkers to avoid large gatherings](#), to temporarily allow city employees to work from home and to require masks at all indoor settings for vaccinated and unvaccinated New Yorkers.

“We need to act now to slow this wave, protect our hospitals, and support the sick,” he said.

His plan has received support from leaders including Randi Weingarten, the head of the country’s most powerful teachers union, and Ron T. Kim, a state assemblyman from Queens.

In September, then-Mayor Bill de Blasio [ordered city employees](#) who had been working from home to return to offices. The city has more than 300,000 workers, and about 80,000 of those who work in offices and had been allowed to work remotely were required to return.

As coronavirus cases began to soar in December, the largest union representing city workers called on Mr. de Blasio to implement a remote policy for employees who are able to do their jobs from home. On Tuesday, a spokeswoman for the union, District Council 37, said it would continue to push Mr. Adams for a remote policy.

“Our nonessential members have proven they can do their jobs from home,” the spokeswoman, Freddi Goldstein, said. “There’s no reason to keep them in the office risking their health.”

Mr. Adams, who is close with District Council 37 leaders, has said that he would discuss the policy with unions.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Covid outbreak Antarctic research station
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#a-belgian-polar-authority-confirms-an-outbreak-at-an-antarctic-research-station
GIST	<p>The International Polar Foundation confirmed on Tuesday that 11 workers at a research station in Antarctica had tested positive for the coronavirus last month despite testing and quarantine requirements for new arrivals.</p> <p>All of the infected workers — eight of whom are still in Antarctica, and three of whom left on a scheduled Dec. 23 flight — were vaccinated and have recovered, according to the foundation, which is based in Belgium and operates that country’s Princess Elisabeth Station Antarctica research facility. (The facility is named for a member of the Belgian royal family.)</p> <p>The outbreak is not the first among the dozens of research stations scattered around Antarctica; 36 people stationed at a Chilean research base there tested positive in December 2020. But it underscores the ruthlessness with which the virus is spreading, even in the most remote places and among the most vaccinated populations.</p> <p>There are now 30 people stationed at the Princess Elisabeth station, which is about 2,600 miles south of Cape Town, South Africa. In addition, four scientists are conducting “remote field work,” according to the foundation.</p> <p>Some news outlets have reported that 16 people tested positive, a number the foundation said was inaccurate. It also pushed back against reports that it had “suspended” flights to and from the station until Jan. 12, saying that no flights had been scheduled between Dec. 23 and Jan. 12 in the first place.</p>

	<p>“The management at the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica offered anyone who so wished the opportunity to leave on a scheduled flight on January 12,” the foundation said in its statement on Tuesday. “However, all who were on longer missions expressed their wish to stay and continue their work. In addition, a new team of scientists will arrive at the station on January 12 as planned. They were also informed of the outbreak and given the opportunity to cancel, which they refused.”</p> <p>Workers at the station are all vaccinated, but only one has received a booster shot. New arrivals are required to take a P.C.R. test within 72 hours of flying to Cape Town; quarantine for five days; take another P.C.R. test within 48 hours of flying from Cape Town to Antarctica; and take a final test five days after arriving at the Princess Elisabeth Station.</p> <p>According to the foundation, a group arrived in Antarctica on Dec. 9, and all members tested negative on Dec. 14.</p> <p>The first infection was detected on Dec. 15. The foundation said medical staff had “isolated all residents of the station who presented symptoms to such a level that there was a risk of further contamination for others” — leaving it unclear whether asymptomatic workers had been required to isolate, and what criteria were used to determine who posed a risk. An infected person can transmit the virus even if they have no symptoms.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Probe: PG&E equipment started Dixie Fire
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/business/dixie-fire-california-pge.html
GIST	<p>California fire investigators on Tuesday pinned the blame for the Dixie Fire — the second largest blaze in the state’s history — on equipment owned by Pacific Gas & Electric and referred the case to prosecutors.</p> <p>The Dixie Fire burned more than 963,000 acres in the Northern California areas of Butte, Plumas, Lassen, Shasta and Tehama Counties in July, destroying 1,329 buildings and damaging 95 others. The cause, investigators determined, was a tree that came into contact with PG&E’s power lines near the Cresta Dam about 100 miles north of Sacramento.</p> <p>Investigators at the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, known as Cal Fire, referred their findings to the Butte County district attorney, who previously brought charges against PG&E for the 2018 Camp Fire, which killed scores of people and destroyed the town of Paradise.</p> <p>In that case, PG&E pleaded guilty to 84 felony counts of involuntary manslaughter and one felony count of illegally setting a fire. The utility also agreed to pay \$3.5 million in fines as part of the criminal plea.</p> <p>In a statement in response to Cal Fire’s determination, PG&E said the tree that fell struck equipment that was functioning properly. “This tree was one of more than eight million trees within strike distance to PG&E lines,” the utility said. “Regardless of today’s finding, we will continue to be tenacious in our efforts to stop fire ignitions from our equipment and to ensure that everyone and everything is always safe.”</p> <p>PG&E also has charges pending in Shasta County, where the district attorney has charged the utility with manslaughter, along with other felonies and misdemeanors in connection with the Zogg Fire, which burned more than 56,000 acres and destroyed 204 buildings near Redding.</p> <p>Since 2017, PG&E has been the focus of the state’s extreme wildfires that have been made worse by climate change. The company has taken numerous steps to prevent wildfires, including installing weather stations and cameras. The utility also has resorted to the extreme measure of cutting off power, sometimes to millions of people for days.</p> <p>After PG&E amassed \$30 billion in liability from the wildfires caused by its equipment, the utility sought bankruptcy protection in January 2019. The company exited from bankruptcy in July 2020, promising to</p>

	<p>work to prevent further wildfires. Victims of the fires have continued to seek compensation for their losses that became part of the company's bankruptcy plan.</p> <p>The Dixie Fire — among at least three fires last year that were suspected of being caused by PG&E's equipment — underscored the lingering threat of wildfires caused by utility equipment.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Philippines expands lockdown amid surge
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#philippines-manila-covid-lockdown
GIST	<p>The Philippines announced on Tuesday that it was expanding a lockdown for unvaccinated people around the capital, Manila, after recording a spike in Covid-19 cases after the holidays.</p> <p>Officials made the announcement after the Philippines reported 4,984 new cases in the country, the highest daily total in recent months for a second straight day.</p> <p>Metropolitan Manila, an area containing 16 cities and a township with a population of about 14 million, had already been placed under the restrictions on Monday. Mayors agreed to bar unvaccinated residents from leaving their homes except for essential reasons, such as for food, water, medical needs and work.</p> <p>Tuesday's announcement expanded the area under restrictions to include Bulacan, Cavite and Rizalbar. The rules will go into effect there on Wednesday and last until Jan. 15.</p> <p>Since the virus emerged in the country, President Rodrigo Duterte has placed several regions, including Luzon, its largest island and home to Manila, under a series of lockdowns.</p> <p>Health officials suggested that vaccine complacency was behind the latest rise in infections.</p> <p>"Despite the availability of vaccines, there is a number of individuals who adamantly opt not to be vaccinated," the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority said in a statement.</p> <p>Benhur Abalos, the head of the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority, which oversees regulations in the megacity, said the measures were necessary "because some of our minors are unvaccinated."</p> <p>"This is just temporary while the cases are rampaging," he said of the lockdown. "So this is just to protect our unvaccinated."</p> <p>Mr. Abalos said the authorities were worried about a 285 percent rise in Covid-19 cases from mid-December to Dec. 31.</p> <p>The government hopes to fully inoculate 77 million Filipinos out of a population of 110 million before May 2022. As of early December, only 40 million have had two doses.</p> <p>Dr. Benjamin Campomanes, executive vice president and chief medical officer of St. Luke's Medical Center in Manila, told a local television station that cases would continue to soar if no measures were taken.</p> <p>"What is very concerning is the exponential increase. Just before New Year, for example, we have had zero admissions here in Quezon City," he said, referring to a metro Manila suburb. "But now we have 41 cases within a week. With this exponential increase, I am worried about a week from today."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Hong Kong expands vaccine requirements
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#hong-kong-expands-its-vaccine-requirements-as-it-fights-to-control-omicron

GIST	<p>Hong Kong residents must have at least one coronavirus vaccine shot to enter restaurants beginning late next month, Carrie Lam, the city's chief executive, said on Tuesday, as the city races to stamp out the spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The new requirements, which were to begin this month, will instead start on Feb. 24, after Lunar New Year celebrations have ended, to give businesses and residents time to prepare, Mrs. Lam said. She added that the rule could be expanded to include other public spaces, such as museums and libraries.</p> <p>The city has maintained strict controls to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, requiring the use of a contact-tracing app in public places, forcing arrivals from overseas to undergo as much as three weeks of quarantine, locking down high-rise buildings and ordering mass testing of residents to stamp out the threat of local spread of Omicron.</p> <p>But Hong Kong's vaccine drive has been set back by residents who are suspicious of the government and its unpopular leader. The city has fully vaccinated only about 69 percent of its population, according to the government.</p> <p>The city announced the toughened requirements as officials were searching for six diners at a restaurant linked to an Omicron cluster affecting more than 300 people.</p> <p>The six were among those who had lunch at the Moon Palace restaurant in the upscale Fashion Walk mall in the Kowloon Tong district on Dec. 27, officials said. The others were sent to a government facility to quarantine.</p> <p>Health officials say they believe that a flight attendant for Cathay Pacific Airways who had ignored isolation rules after returning from the United States infected his father and another person while dining at Moon Palace that day. The airline said it had fired the unnamed flight attendant and one other Cathay employee as a result of the outbreak.</p> <p>Hong Kong recorded 13 new coronavirus cases on Tuesday. So far, six Omicron cases have been connected to the restaurant; the city has recorded 102 cases of the variant in total.</p> <p>Mrs. Lam's government has made resumption of normal travel with mainland China a priority, and she said on Tuesday that the Omicron cases would most likely delay plans to ease travel restrictions between Hong Kong and the mainland.</p> <p>"I would not deny that that has an impact, which means that we would have to wait another while before we could put in place the very sought-after resumption of normal travel between Hong Kong and the mainland," she said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 More workers quit; job openings near high
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/business/economy/job-openings-coronavirus.html
GIST	<p>A record number of Americans quit their jobs in November, even as employers found it slightly easier to fill their open positions.</p> <p>More than 4.5 million people voluntarily left their jobs in November, the Labor Department said Tuesday. That was up from 4.2 million in October and was the most in the two decades that the government has been keeping track. The rate of quitting has been especially high in hospitality and other low-wage sectors, where workers have been taking advantage of strong demand to look for jobs with better pay or working conditions.</p> <p>There were 10.6 million job openings posted on the last day of November. That was down from 11.1 million in October, but still more than in any month before the pandemic began — and far more than the roughly seven million Americans looking for work.</p>

	<p>“Employer demand is still extremely high, and the result of that is increased competition for workers,” said Daniel Zhao, senior economist at the career site Glassdoor. “That means more job openings, higher wages and more churn in the labor market.”</p> <p>Competition for workers has led to faster wage growth this year, particularly for those changing jobs. Hourly wages for job switchers were up 4.3 percent in November on average, compared to a 3.2 percent gain for people who stayed in their jobs, according to data from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta.</p> <p>The data released Tuesday is from the Labor Department’s survey of job openings and labor turnover, known as JOLTS. On Friday, the department will release data from December on employment, unemployment and earnings, which most forecasters expect to show that job growth accelerated at the end of the year.</p> <p>The data in both reports, however, predates the recent explosion of coronavirus cases across the country. The latest Covid-19 wave, linked to the Omicron variant of the virus, has forced airlines to cancel flights, businesses to delay return-to-office plans and school districts to return temporarily to remote learning. How that will affect the broader economy, Mr. Zhao said, remains unclear.</p> <p>“The data that we’re getting now isn’t fully capturing the impact of Omicron,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Forced labor Beijing Olympic merchandise?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/world/asia/ioc-china.html
GIST	<p>The activists’ request was straightforward: They wanted to share their concerns about human rights in China, in particular the possibility that official merchandise for the Beijing Olympics was being made with forced labor, and to hear what the International Olympic Committee was doing to ensure it was not.</p> <p>For months, they pressed Olympics officials for a conversation. At first, the I.O.C. demurred. Eventually, officials from the committee agreed to meet — but only for an “active listening exercise,” not to share any information. And the talk would have to remain secret.</p> <p>Finally, late last month, the I.O.C. pulled out entirely from meeting with the activist group, the Coalition to End Forced Labor in the Uyghur Region.</p> <p>“While the I.O.C. will continue strengthening its work in relation to labor rights,” said the email from Magali Martowicz, the I.O.C.’s head of human rights, “we regret to conclude that your organization and the I.O.C. will not be able to engage in a dialogue this time as a result of differences in approach, including regarding scope, process and confidentiality.”</p> <p>Concerns about China’s human rights record loom over the country’s preparations to host the Winter Olympics in Beijing next month. World leaders and activists have focused on the authorities’ suppression of the predominantly Muslim Uyghur minority, in the western Xinjiang region, and allegations that Uyghurs are being pressed into forced labor. The United States, Britain, Canada and Australia have announced diplomatic boycotts.</p> <p>The I.O.C. has consistently deflected calls to exert more pressure on China — a lucrative market and an important financial and organizational partner for the Olympics — for its potential abuses. When Peng Shuai, a three-time Olympian, disappeared from public life after accusing a top Chinese leader of coercing her into sex, the I.O.C. held a video call with her and said she appeared to be safe, despite widespread global concern. When challenged on China’s suppression of civil liberties in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet, officials have argued that the Games are not political.</p> <p>But the correspondence between the I.O.C. and the anti-forced labor coalition, which was reviewed by The New York Times, shows how reluctant the committee is to engage Beijing’s critics even on issues directly related to the operation of the Games.</p>

Companies [may be unable](#) to guarantee that their products are not made with forced labor, especially given China's restrictions on outsiders in Xinjiang. But the I.O.C. appears reluctant even to try, members of the coalition said — echoing the concerns of other human rights groups.

“They either had nothing to say or show on due diligence on forced labor, or they were unwilling because they won't cross swords with Beijing,” said Bennett Freeman, a former State Department official who sent the emails to the I.O.C. on the coalition's behalf.

As a result, he said, “it is really impossible at this point for the I.O.C. to rule out Uyghur forced labor content in Olympic-branded merchandise.”

The I.O.C. has met with other human rights activists about the Chinese Communist Party's crackdowns in Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang. But those activists later accused the I.O.C. of dismissing their concerns. The I.O.C. also met with Human Rights Watch in January but rebuffed the group's requests for information about its due diligence procedures, said Minky Worden, the group's director of global initiatives.

The I.O.C. has proved more willing to engage with human rights concerns elsewhere, Ms. Worden said. In 2014, the I.O.C., under pressure from activists, [prodded](#) the Russian government to investigate claims of unpaid wages to workers who had helped build Winter Games venues in Sochi. Last year, the committee [raised concerns](#) with Japanese officials about conditions for construction workers ahead of the Tokyo Olympics.

But, Ms. Worden said, “there's a different system for China.”

The I.O.C. has defended its approach to human rights concerns in China, arguing that sports are a tool to building a better world. In an emailed response to questions, it said it was willing to engage with critics, and it defended its sourcing practices, noting that it engages with suppliers and at times conducts audits.

It said the organizing committee in Beijing, which is led by Chinese government officials, would release a report addressing responsible sourcing in mid-January.

“It is our policy that the I.O.C. hears all concerns that are directly related to the Olympic Games,” the statement said. But “while generic concerns have been expressed in the past about Beijing 2022's product sourcing, the I.O.C. has not been approached about any specific case or situation, including by the Coalition.”

As for the failed meeting attempt, the I.O.C. said it had offered the activists terms for “a constructive engagement” and been declined.

The Chinese government has denied any accusations of forced labor in Xinjiang, and companies that criticize Beijing's human rights record have suffered fierce backlash from nationalistic Chinese consumers. Intel, the chip maker, [apologized to Chinese customers](#) last month after its announcement that it would avoid products and labor from Xinjiang provoked fury on Chinese social media.

Concerns about Uyghur forced labor largely revolve around the clothing industry, as Xinjiang supplies one-fifth of the world's cotton or yarn. Investigations by [The Times](#), [The Wall Street Journal](#), [Axios](#) and others have found evidence linking China's forced detention of Uyghurs — which has ensnared as many as one million people in internment camps and coercive labor programs — to the supply chains of leading fashion retailers.

The I.O.C. also has ties to companies that use Xinjiang cotton. The committee's [official sportswear uniform supplier](#) is Anta, a Chinese sportswear giant that has [affirmed its commitment](#) to Xinjiang cotton. In its emailed statement, the I.O.C. said it had recently carried out third-party audits for the uniforms to be provided by Anta and found “no issue” with forced labor.

Pressure on companies to disentangle themselves from such potential abuses is growing. Last month, President Joseph R. Biden signed a [bipartisan bill to ban the import of goods](#) made “in whole or in part” in Xinjiang, unless companies could prove that they were not made with forced labor.

Informal efforts to arrange a conversation between the I.O.C. and the Coalition to End Forced Labor in the Uyghur Region — a group of more than 300 organizations established last year — began in May, according to Mr. Freeman. Finally, in the fall, the I.O.C. invited the coalition to send a formal request to meet, which it did, on Oct. 8.

Officials at first offered a written response instead. In an email on Oct. 29, Ms. Martowicz, the head of human rights, replied to Mr. Freeman to say that the I.O.C.’s sourcing policies banned forced labor. But she did not say how the I.O.C. enforced that ban, other than “from time to time” “engaging with our suppliers” — in other words, the companies themselves — “to request evidence of compliance.”

Third-party checks, she added, were something the I.O.C. “will be looking at” in “coming months.”

Critics say the I.O.C. has been slow to adopt a human rights framework, compared with corporations or even other global sports organizations, such as FIFA. The I.O.C. has adopted new requirements for host cities to uphold international standards on human rights, but those do not take effect until 2024.

Three days after Ms. Martowicz’s email, the coalition asked again for a conversation. Finally, on Dec. 9, Ms. Martowicz said the I.O.C. would meet — with conditions.

The talk would be a one-time event. It would be kept confidential before, during and after, the emails showed. And the I.O.C. would listen only.

“For the sake of clarity, during the Exercise the I.O.C. will not be sharing information (other than what has already been shared) with the Coalition,” Ms. Martowicz wrote.

Zumretay Arkin, program and advocacy manager at the World Uyghur Congress, a Uyghur rights group that is part of the coalition, said she found that condition laughable.

“It just tells you that they don’t want to commit to changing things,” she said.

On Dec. 14, Mr. Freeman reiterated the call for a two-way conversation and asked to be allowed to talk publicly about the meeting after it happened. A week later, the I.O.C. cut off discussions.

Ms. Arkin said she had been skeptical all along about the I.O.C.’s willingness to meet with the coalition. She had participated in the previous, separate meetings between the I.O.C. and Uyghur, Tibetan and Hong Kong activists, which did not have confidentiality requirements, she said. Afterward, the activists had used those talks to further publicly criticize China.

“There’s part of me that thinks,” she said of the I.O.C., “they don’t want to offend Beijing anymore.”

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HEADLINE	01/04 Toll of reporting on Covid in China
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/04/detained-missing-close-to-death-toll-reporting-covid-china
GIST	<p>Chen Kun was living in Indonesia with his wife and daughter when he learned from his brother Mei’s boss that he had been “taken away for investigation” by Chinese police.</p> <p>He immediately suspected it was to do with his brother’s website, a citizen news project called Terminus 2049. Since 2018 Mei, his colleague Cai Wei, and Cai’s partner – surnamed Tang – had been archiving articles about issues including #MeToo and migrant rights, and reposting them whenever they were deleted from China’s strictly monitored and censored online platforms. It was April 2020, and for the last few months Terminus 2049 had been targeting stories about the Covid-19 outbreak and response.</p>

In an interview with the Guardian from his home in France, Chen recalled warning his shy but passionate younger brother about setting up such a website, but thinking the worst case scenario was that Mei would be “invited to drink tea”, a euphemism for interrogation by security agencies, not arrested.

Instead Mei and Cai spent almost 16 months in detention. Tang was released in May, when the other two were convicted at a trial which Chen said lasted just 100 minutes. Mei and Cai were sentenced to 15 months jail and released in August on time served. Mei is potentially still under surveillance.

The group is on a growing list of journalists and others who have been arrested and detained by Chinese authorities, often without trial, in a crackdown that appeared to escalate during the pandemic.

In December a report by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) detailed [a worsening “nightmare” for journalists](#) under the rule of Xi Jinping, with 128 known to be behind bars or disappeared. More than 70 are Uyghur journalists, and at least 10 people were arrested for reporting on the Covid outbreak and lockdown in Wuhan.

Chen said it was a sign of how sensitive Chinese authorities were and remain about the pandemic and its origins.

“I’m sure the reason why my brother was arrested was because of Covid,” Chen said. “Before his arrest ... they didn’t encounter any problems.”

‘A war on independent journalism’

Mei was formally arrested for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”, a vague and ubiquitous charge frequently levelled at dissidents, activists and journalists, and sent to residential surveillance in a designated location (RSDL) – China’s increasingly utilised form of secretive and solitary detention where the accused can be held for up to six months and interrogated without charge, or access to lawyers or family.

The rights group Safeguard Defenders estimates between 45,000 and 55,000 people have been sent to RSDL, including about 15,000 in 2020. Among them have been Mei, the Australian CGTN anchor Cheng Lei, the journalist Sophia Huang Xueqin and the activist Wang Jianbing.

Mei and his Terminus 2049 colleagues were freed in August, and he is living at home in China. Chen is still advocating for those still detained, particularly Huang, and says that neither his brother nor their parents are aware of his campaigning.

As well as reporting on the #MeToo movement and the Hong Kong protests – the latter for which she was detained for three months in 2019 – Huang had also interviewed Chen and written about Mei.

“She was always trying to record the stories and experiences of a lot of people like my brother, about defenders,” Chen said.

The independent investigative journalist has not been seen since she and Wang were arrested in September on the eve of her planned departure to study in Europe. In October her parents were told she had been formally arrested for “subverting state power”.

Also subject to human rights campaigns is [Zhang Zhan](#), a former lawyer turned citizen reporter, who last Christmas was sentenced to four years in jail over 122 videos she posted online and interviews she gave to foreign press during 14 weeks in Wuhan. Deep into a lengthy hunger strike, which no friends or family can convince her to stop, Zhang is close to death, her family says.

While human rights observers, legal groups, and media organisations maintain she should never have been convicted in the first place, an international campaign is urgently calling for her release on any grounds possible, to save her life.

	<p>Feng Bin, who like Zhang broadcast reports on YouTube from Wuhan, has not been seen since his arrest in February 2020, and Li Zehu, who broadcast the police chase which led to his arrest around the same time, was detained for two months. Chen Qiushi, a former human rights lawyer turned citizen journalist, reported from Wuhan's hospitals interviewing families, disappeared at the same time and didn't reappear until September.</p> <p>In February 2020 Cheng Lei, an anchor for Chinese state broadcaster CGTN, posted on Facebook that she and her friend Haze Fan, a Bloomberg news assistant, had been unsuccessfully lobbying to report from Wuhan. In August Cheng was detained and later charged with "illegally supplying state secrets overseas". Fan was detained in December. Both remain in detention more than a year later.</p> <p>Cedric Alviari, RSF's east Asia bureau director, said the 128 detained journalists and press freedom defenders is the biggest count in five years. It includes 71 Uyghur journalists, and at least 10 who face impending death if not immediately released, according to RSF.</p> <p>Alviari said the crackdown is driven by Xi, who has "declared a war on independent journalism" after tightening controls on traditional media.</p> <p>"Everything he and the CCP have been doing over the past eight years ... has been to suppress independent voices.," he said.</p> <p>"The Chinese people, like every person on earth, crave information on what's happening around them."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Taiwan buys Lithuania rum China rejected
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/04/taiwan-buys-20400-bottles-of-lithuanian-rum-rejected-by-china
GIST	<p>Taiwan's government is sharing cocktail recipes with the public after it reportedly bought 20,400 bottles of Lithuanian rum bound for China amid a row between Vilnius and Beijing.</p> <p>The state-owned Taiwan Tobacco and Liquor (TTL) said it made the purchase in December to support Lithuania after learning the shipment was going to be blocked by Chinese authorities.</p> <p>"TTL stood up at the right time, purchased the rum and brought it to Taiwan," the company said in a statement reported by the South China Morning Post. "Lithuania supports us and we support Lithuania – TTL calls for a toast to that."</p> <p>Lithuania is in an ongoing diplomatic dispute with Beijing, and has been hit with trade and other restrictions since it announced it would establish mutual diplomatic posts with Taiwan.</p> <p>The South China Morning Post said Taiwan's finance ministry, which wholly owns TTL, and the de facto ambassador to Lithuania, Eric Huang, had learned China was going to reject the shipment, and informed TTL.</p> <p>TTL and the producer of the dark rum, MV Group Productions, have not responded to the claims. However, in a Facebook post on Tuesday, Taiwan's national development council, the parliament's policy planning agency, posted a list of rum-based cocktails and other recipes and urged people to be ready to buy the product in late January.</p> <p>The post called on people to "support Lithuania", saying the two countries were very friendly and had helped each other during the pandemic.</p> <p>The Chinese government has for months been applying pressure and blocking trade with Lithuania, outraged over Vilnius allowing the word "Taiwan" to be used in the name of Taipei's de facto embassy.</p>

	<p>Taiwan usually uses the word “Taipei” in naming its diplomatic offices. Beijing claims Taiwan as a province and is hypersensitive to any action which appears to support Taiwan’s stance of being a sovereign nation.</p> <p>In recent years Beijing has frequently blocked or restricted imports from countries it is engaged in diplomatic disputes with, including coal, wine, and lobsters from Australia, and pineapples from Taiwan. Taiwan’s government is working to strengthen relationships with friendly nations as it seeks to resist Chinese aggression, and has in the past enthusiastically supported those hit with trade restrictions, urging Taiwanese people to buy up the product.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Desperation: China locks down city of 13M
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/lockdown-of-chinese-city-leave-13-million-stranded-11641314909?mod=hp_lead_pos9
GIST	<p>A week and a half into one of the biggest pandemic lockdowns in China, residents of Xi’an voiced desperation online about challenges in getting food and medical care.</p> <p>China’s Covid-19 count remains low in comparison with other countries, hovering at around 100 a day. In the past few days, about 90% of cases have been in Xi’an, the city of terracotta-warrior fame in China’s northwest, which has confirmed 1,758 total Covid-19 infections since Dec. 9, a high number for China. Most of the cases have been mild, officials said. No deaths related to Covid-19 have been reported anywhere in China in the past 11 months, including Xi’an.</p> <p>Nonetheless, Covid-19-control seems to trump all other priorities in Xi’an, which is following a playbook similar to the one deployed two years ago in Wuhan, the first Covid-19 epicenter.</p> <p>Like in Wuhan in early 2020, no one is allowed to enter or leave Xi’an. Most of the city’s 13 million residents can leave their homes only for Covid-19 testing. Few vehicles are allowed in the streets except for those transporting essential workers and supplies, and many supermarkets and hospitals are closed.</p> <p>The online complaints of tens of thousands of stranded residents show how local officials must weigh the costs of extreme restrictions, such as rolling lockdowns and mandatory quarantines, against the benefit of keeping the case count low, in what Beijing calls a zero-tolerance Covid-19 strategy.</p> <p>One month away from the 2022 Winter Olympics, the stakes are high for Beijing. The quick spread of the Omicron variant could severely complicate virus-control scenarios at the Games, which coincide with the Lunar New Year, when millions are expected to travel.</p> <p>Omicron has yet to make significant inroads in China. When Xi’an first locked down, officials said the recent wave of infections had been caused by the Delta variant. That is still the case, a national health official told state media on Tuesday.</p> <p>In recent days, local residents have circulated a document purporting to show that local officials are preparing to move anyone deemed to have been near an infected person—a vague definition that can mean someone in the same apartment complex—into quarantine centers outside the city. Xi’an officials said in a Monday briefing that the city was housing nearly 40,000 people in 387 quarantine centers.</p> <p>Almost all the new cases have been detected among quarantined residents. The city can only ease restrictions once community spread, meaning infections detected outside quarantine centers, is down to zero, a Xi’an health official told the Xinhua News Agency on Tuesday.</p> <p>China tallies both symptomatic and asymptomatic cases but includes only the former in its official count of confirmed cases.</p>

“My biggest fear is not lack of food but being dragged to some unknown quarantine centers because one neighbor in the same building tested positive,” one resident posted on Weibo, a [Twitter](#) -like platform.

Discussions about the Xi'an lockdown had dominated among social-media topics in China in recent days with little sign of severe censorship, though some criticism appears to have been scrubbed.

The Xi'an municipal government couldn't be reached for comment; city and provincial health authorities didn't respond to requests for comment.

When Xi'an ordered the lockdown on Dec. 22, it said one family member would be allowed to do grocery runs every two days. It later tightened the rules as more cases were confirmed. Most grocery stores were closed and most online delivery services were suspended.

One of those who complained online, identifying himself as a migrant worker, said that in the first week of the lockdown, the only food he managed to buy before he received a government food package was one baby cabbage, 10 steamed buns and 5 kilograms of flour.

“To be honest, I don't think Covid is scary. I think having no food to eat is my biggest threat,” he wrote on the WeChat social-media app.

Most local governments have managed to avoid wholesale lockdowns with tools such as “health codes” on mobile phones that track people's movements in ways that facilitate contact-tracing and mass testing. In a lockdown early last year of Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei province with 11 million people, early last year, basic services including food delivery continued and most supermarkets stayed open. But in the Rust Belt city of Tonghua, an abrupt lockdown also left many searching for necessities such as food and medicine.

Glimpses of life during the lockdown almost exclusively come from locals' social-media postings. Jiang Xue, an independent journalist based in Xi'an, wrote in an article published on WeChat that she had no doubt the city would defeat the virus, but questioned the cost. “If afterward, there are no reflections and no lessons learned...then all the hardship will be in vain.”

State-media coverage has mostly described a robust response by local authorities to the situation. One video showed police rushing an infant to a hospital after the mother sought help, saying her child hadn't been getting needed leukemia treatment because of the lockdown and was having trouble breathing.

By contrast, a video that went viral over the weekend showed a man being beaten by guards, with comments alleging that he had gone out to buy steamed buns on New Year's Eve. Following an online outcry at the video, which showed the buns scattered on the ground, police said two guards had been detained, and that they had apologized to the man.

Another video circulated online showed firefighters having to climb over the newly blocked gate of an apartment complex to put out a fire.

One woman wrote on the social-media platform Xiaohongshu about losing her father to a heart attack, saying her initial calls for an ambulance went unanswered and by the time he was seen, it was too late. Xiaohongshu has since removed her posts, citing “negative content and misleading society.” The woman didn't respond to requests for comment.

The city government has published a list of hospitals open to non-Covid-19 patients, though some residents said they couldn't get through to phone numbers provided.

After Xi'an announced the lockdown, some tried to flee. One man hopped on a shared bicycle and pedaled for nearly 10 hours toward his hometown about 56 miles from Xi'an before he was caught, according to a police statement. He was placed under quarantine and fined 200 yuan, equivalent to around \$31, for violating Covid-19-prevention rules.

	<p>Before the pandemic, Xi'an had been positioning itself as a modern innovation center with an open, welcoming and efficient city government. To attract talented workers, the city offered living allowances and rent subsidies and touted a fledgling high-tech zone.</p> <p>The efforts seem to have paid off. Within just three years, between 2018 and 2020, the city gained nearly three million people, official data show. Its economy was one of the fastest-growing in western China.</p> <p>Some commenters on social media warned against criticizing Xi'an's lockdown, saying that could damage the image of both the city and China.</p> <p>A college student from Xi'an said she couldn't bear any criticism about the city on social media, either from strangers or friends. Then, after she failed to get any fresh vegetables or fruit for almost a week, her firm stance wavered. "I love my city but I'm so disappointed this time," she said.</p> <p>In Xi'an on New Year's Day, Liu Guozhong, party chief of Shaanxi province, urged officials not to let down their guard. "Strict management of key venues mustn't be relaxed," he said, according to a statement on the provincial government website.</p> <p>His remarks followed a visit by Vice Premier Sun Chunlan, who urged local officials to get the outbreak under control as soon as possible.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/05 Europe public health care systems stress
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/virus-surge-tests-limits-primary-health-care-europe-82083551
GIST	<p>MADRID -- Like many people, Alberto Pérez of Madrid used a home test to discover that his headache and cold-like symptoms were caused by COVID-19.</p> <p>Unable to contact his local health center, where calls went unanswered and online appointments were booked up for the following week, he turned to a hospital emergency room for confirmation. After waiting three hours to be seen, health workers there agreed with his self-diagnosis but provided no PCR test to ensure a more reliable result.</p> <p>"The nurse seeing me said that, because I had not lost my sense of taste or smell, I had the omicron variant," said Pérez, 39, who works as an online game developer in the Spanish capital. "But how could she know?"</p> <p>Overwhelmed by people wanting tests, requiring medication or needing certificates to excuse their absence from work, primary health care services in Spain are operating well past their limit during the current phase of the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>Family doctors are usually the first stop for health care in Europe. They and primary care nurses are viewed as vital to helping prevent sickness, keeping the pressure off hospitals and providing continuity of care.</p> <p>In a country that only a few weeks ago thought itself relatively safe because more than 80% of the target population is fully vaccinated, the mounting workload in Spain has prompted doctors and nurses to cancel regular checkups for conditions other than COVID-19 and postpone visits to vulnerable people at home.</p> <p>Because Pérez's positive test had been taken at home, neither the hospital nor his local health center would spare the much-needed resources to give him a PCR test. The PCR samples can be sequenced to determine virus variants, something nobody did with Pérez or with many thousands of other positive cases from home tests in Spain.</p>

“You are left with the feeling that there are no resources, that they have no people, and that all they do is cover up the reality by sending people home,” Pérez said.

Caroline Berchet, a health economist at the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, says primary health care in Europe has been underfunded and understaffed for a long time. The pandemic has simply exposed the resulting frailties in the system.

“Investment in primary health care is not enough across Europe” and beyond, Berchet said. In the 38 OECD member countries, which include the United States, on average only 13% of health spending in 2019 was devoted to primary health care, compared with 28% on in-patient care.

“Primary health care requires better funding and investment in all (OECD) countries,” she said, to ensure more staff, more training, better pay and working conditions, and a more flexible delivery of care.

Paloma Repila, a spokeswoman for SATSE, the biggest Spanish union representing nurses, said that fewer hospitalizations in the current surge mean that many people with milder symptoms are having a “brutal impact” on local health centers.

“Infection rates are so high that we are taking the pandemic out of the health care setting and we are asking people to be their own carers,” she said.

“Individual responsibility is great, but asking people to self-diagnose, to deal with their own medical leave and to be left without any follow-up by professionals, is extremely worrisome.”

In France, years of funding cuts to the public health system are blamed for shortages of doctors in rural areas.

There’s a similar problem in Italy, where general practitioners are feeling the weight of the latest surge as well as the burdens of increased paperwork to certify people are safe to return to work and school, officials say.

Repila, the Spanish union spokeswoman, said authorities should be worried about the consequences.

“If you take the test at home, what variant of the virus do you have? We don’t know,” she said. “Everything, including the length of self-isolation periods, is being decided based on sequencing that isn’t happening.”

Even the daily figures that provide headlines and inform the response by experts and policymakers are once again out of sync, like they were at the beginning of the pandemic. That’s because home test results are not being reported to overwhelmed health centers, either because phones are not being answered, because there are no appointments, or because people are simply not bothering.

Health Minister Carolina Darias last week appealed for people to report their positive tests, even when they show no symptoms or if they decide to stay at home with mild ones.

Unions and other professional groups say medical personnel cannot cope with the number of phone calls, video-assisted consultations and requests for tests, advice, treatment or issuing certificates for people who need to justify an absence from work.

Contact tracing, once viewed as a key to halting the pandemic, is something that has been long forgotten.

Primary care has been out of the media and public attention for much of the pandemic, when most of the concern was focused on the capacity to cope with the flow of patients into hospitals and intensive care units.

	<p>But labor groups and professional associations say the problems began much earlier, the result of years of underfunding that has led to many temporary contracts for medical staff and poor health facilities.</p> <p>After the 2008 European debt crisis, a conservative government in Spain imposed strict austerity measures that meant significant budget cuts for the public health system. Similar cuts occurred elsewhere in Europe.</p> <p>Spain's center-left Socialist government last month unveiled a plan to improve the quality and accessibility of primary health care in the next two years. Critics said the move was overdue.</p> <p>Ten days after completing his quarantine at his Madrid home, Pérez, the online game developer, kept testing positive with home kits but was still struggling to get an appointment with his general practitioner. His health center, which he finally reached by phone, told him to stay home for the New Year's holiday, and offered a phone call the following week.</p> <p>"There are no doctors or nurses and then we are left to deal with this on our own," Pérez said. "How is that not linked?"</p>
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HEADLINE	01/05 Australia rising cases, hospitalizations
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/australia-pm-meets-national-cabinet-amid-virus-surge-82081021
GIST	<p>SYDNEY -- Australia on Wednesday saw another jump in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations and long queues at testing centers as it continued to battle the rapid spread of the virus in most states.</p> <p>The country recorded more than 64,000 cases, up from 47,000 a day earlier, and Prime Minister Scott Morrison met virtually with the national cabinet — the leaders of Australia's states and territories — to discuss how to respond to almost daily records in new cases and rising pressure on hospitals.</p> <p>Morrison has faced increasing calls to make rapid antigen tests available free to relieve pressure on PCR testing centers, many of which have been forced to close after reaching capacity. People who have been tested often face long waits for results from overburdened laboratories.</p> <p>Speaking to reporters after the national cabinet meeting, Morrison said state premiers and first ministers opposed universal free tests. But more than 6 million Australians including seniors and others on welfare or with low incomes will be eligible for up to 10 free tests every three months. Free tests also are available to those who have symptoms or are deemed close contacts.</p> <p>Among other measures to alleviate pressure on PCR testing centers, Morrison said those who return a positive rapid antigen test no longer need to have a PCR test to confirm the result.</p> <p>New South Wales, the country's most populous state, saw a record 35,054 new cases on Wednesday as it awaits the arrival of 50 million rapid antigen tests ordered by the state government.</p> <p>State Premier Dominic Perrottet urged residents not to seek PCR tests unless necessary, adding that the arrival of the rapid testing kits expected next week would "significantly assist."</p> <p>Victoria reported 17,636 cases, a state record, and Queensland saw 6,871 cases.</p> <p>The case numbers do not necessarily reflect the true spread of the virus as they only count the number of recorded cases.</p> <p>Hospitalizations nationwide stood at 2,990 on Wednesday, with 196 patients in intensive care. Both numbers were higher than the previous day, when 2,684 hospitalizations were recorded, with 183 people in intensive care.</p>

	<p>Morrison said Australia is not alone in experiencing shortages of rapid antigen tests because of supply problems caused by the spread of omicron worldwide. He said around 200 million rapid antigen tests are on their way to Australia but until they arrive “tension” will continue in the testing system.</p> <p>“We are not on our own in dealing with this. Other countries, most countries around the world, are dealing with exactly the same problems,” Morrison said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/05 France president berates unvaccinated
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/shrill-protests-france-macron-targets-unvaccinated-82083482
GIST	<p>PARIS -- French President Emmanuel Macron has provoked outcries in parliament and protests from election rivals by using a vulgarity to describe his strategy for pressuring vaccine refusers to get coronavirus jabs.</p> <p>Macron used the French word “emmerder,” rooted in the French word for “crap” and meaning to rile or to bug, in an interview published by French newspaper Le Parisien on Tuesday night. The president made the explosive remark as lawmakers are heatedly debating new measures that would allow only the vaccinated to enjoy leisure activities such as eating out.</p> <p>“The unvaccinated, I really want to bug them. And so we will continue doing so, to the end. That's the strategy,” Le Parisien quoted the French leader as saying in a sit-down interview at the presidential Elysee Palace with a panel of its readers.</p> <p>His use of earthy language more commonly heard at the counters of French cafés further complicated the already difficult passage in parliament of the government's planned new vaccine pass. Lawmakers debated into early Wednesday morning before their discussions were again suspended, disrupted by the furor over Macron's remarks.</p> <p>The vaccine pass will exclude unvaccinated individuals from places such as restaurants, cinemas, theaters, museums and sports arenas. The pass will also be required on inter-regional trains and buses, and on domestic flights.</p> <p>Opposition lawmakers protested audibly in the National Assembly chamber as Macron's health minister, Olivier Veran, sought to defend the president's choice of words.</p> <p>Veran said Macron's interview demonstrated his “intention, above all, to protect the population.”</p> <p>Critics accused Macron of behavior unbecoming a president and of targeting the unvaccinated to win support from the 90% of French adults who are fully vaccinated. Opposition lawmaker Sébastien Jumel said Macron “deliberately chose to add hysteria to the debate.”</p> <p>Macron is facing reelection in April.</p> <p>Far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, who opposed the vaccine pass proposal, said the president wants “to wage war against a portion of the French.”</p> <p>Another far-right candidate, Eric Zemmour, accused Macron of “cruelty.” On the far left, presidential candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon asked: “Is the president in control of what he says?”</p> <p>Macron's supporters suggested the president simply expressed out loud what some vaccinated people already think about the non-vaccinated, in a country with bitter divides over the issue.</p> <p>France reported a record-smashing 271,686 daily virus cases Tuesday as omicron infections race across the country, burdening hospital staff and threatening to disrupt transportation, schools and other services.</p>

	<p>Macron's government is straining to avoid a new economically damaging lockdown that could hurt his reelection prospects. Ministers are instead trying to rush the vaccine pass bill through parliament in hopes that it will be enough to keep hospitals from becoming overwhelmed.</p> <p>More than 20,000 people are hospitalized with COVID-19 in France, a number that has been rising steadily for weeks but not as sharply as the country's infection rates.</p> <p>COVID-19 patients fill more than 72% of France's intensive care unit ICU beds, and its once-renowned health care system is again showing signs of strain. Most virus patients in ICUs are not vaccinated against the coronavirus, though 77% of the French population has had at least two doses.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/05 Israel: infections spike to record high
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/israel-omicron-drives-confusing-policy-amid-4th-jab-82083447
GIST	<p>TEL AVIV, Israel -- Israel opened to tourists for the first time in nearly two years. After just a month, it slammed shut. Now the omicron variant has set a widely-expected record for new infections in the country, which will once again crack open on Sunday — but only to travelers from certain nations.</p> <p>The back-and-forth has created whiplash for many Israelis. Even in the relatively small, wealthy Mideast nation - an early global leader against the coronavirus pandemic - the omicron variant is outpacing the government's ability to make and execute clear pandemic public policy. What once was a straightforward regimen of vaccines, testing, contact tracing and distancing for the nation of 9.4 million has splintered into a zigzag of rules that seem to change every few days.</p> <p>The confusion here, on everything from tourism to testing, quarantines, masks and school policy, offers a glimpse of the pandemic puzzle facing governments worldwide as the omicron variant burns through the population. Someday, the World Health Organization will declare the pandemic over. But in the meantime, leaders are weighing how much illness, isolation and death people are willing to risk.</p> <p>In Israel as elsewhere, what's clear is that the ultra-contagious omicron variant has pushed the fight against COVID-19 into a messier phase of rules governed by a key assumption: Large portions of the public will contract the omicron version, which is more contagious but appears to cause less severe illness and death, especially among vaccinated people. But vaccinated people are catching the variant too, driving a surge fed in part by gatherings over the winter holidays.</p> <p>On Wednesday, the government reported a record for the pandemic in Israel, with 11,978 new infections a day earlier. That beats the previous high of 11,345 infections in a single day set on Sept. 2 during the delta variant wave.</p> <p>“There is no control of the omicron wave,” said Sharon Alroy-Preis, the Health Ministry’s top public health official on Israel’s Channel 13 this week.</p> <p>“Probably no one is protected from infection,” said Jonathan Halevy, president of Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem on Tuesday.</p> <p>The new goal is to protect society's most vulnerable people without another national lockdown — the red line Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and the country's 7-month-old government are laboring to avoid.</p> <p>“It’s a different ballgame altogether,” Bennett said during a press conference Sunday as he warned that the number of daily infections is expected to soar to new records in the coming weeks.</p> <p>“We must keep our eye on the ball if we want to continue engaging and working with an open country as much as possible,” he added.</p>

In everyday life, that's meant a morass of confusion as Bennett and the coalition government he leads struggle to agree on rules and communicate their decisions to the public.

"Education Ministry Leaves Principals to Contend With COVID-19 Chaos Alone," blared a headline in the Haaretz daily Tuesday. A lack of national guidance, the story said, is forcing some school principals to decide on their own whether to hold classes in person, remotely or some combination.

Bennett at the press conference argued the government was staying agile in the face of the more challenging variant. This included a government decision, after some back-and-forth, to give a fourth vaccination to the immunocompromised and people at least age 60. Israel is believed to be the first country in the world to offer segments of its population a second booster shot.

On Tuesday, Bennett announced that a preliminary study at Sheba Medical Center found the fourth jab produced a five-fold increase in antibodies in the blood. Israel also is on the cusp of making available drugs that could help people in at-risk groups avoid severe infections.

"Most ministries are working together now better than they were under the old government," led by divisive former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, said Dr. Nadav Davidovich, who heads Ben-Gurion University's school of public health and sits on the national advisory committee on coronavirus.

So the government's decision, for example, to shutter Israel's borders in late November bought time to raise the country's vaccination rates, which rose toward the middle and end of the month. It also allowed hospitals to prepare for a likely wave of illness.

The vaccinated population has been steadily on the rise, but is limited in part by ultra-Orthodox Jews and some Arabs who have been slow to roll up their sleeves. About 63% of people in Israel have been vaccinated twice, while around 46% have received three jabs.

Our World in Data ranks Israel 17th in the world for vaccination rates, behind other wealthy nations like the United Arab Emirates and the United States — and just ahead of archrival Iran. Back in June, Israel was No. 1 on the list.

But it's been clear for days that a new wave has arrived. Government data showed new infections in Israel spiking to 10,815 on Monday, some 7,000 more than a week earlier. Severe illnesses have stayed mostly constant for several months and daily deaths from coronavirus have not exceeded two since Dec. 13, government records show.

Still, the process remains messy and confusing given the variant's fast-moving spread.

On Wednesday in the shadow of the record-setting spike of infections, there was more change. Israel's health minister announced that the demand for testing was slowing the results and recommended more at-home rapid testing to ease the burden.

Quarantines that two weeks ago were required of anyone who might have been exposed to the virus are being scaled back in order to prevent the economy from grinding to a halt.

Contact tracing has become more complicated given the shortage of tests.

Israel's list of countries whose tourists are banned has been scaled back, with the Health Ministry on Monday recommending that Canada, France, South Africa, Hungary, Nigeria, Spain and Portugal be removed.

Travel to and from the United States and United Kingdom remains forbidden.

There's been considerable hand-wringing over any suggestion of "herd immunity" — when enough people have either been vaccinated or recovered from a past infection to stop the virus' uncontrolled spread.

	<p>Israel's health chief, Nachman Ash, said the fourth shot could be offered to more Israelis, but it's not certain whether it could be rolled out quickly enough.</p> <p>"The price of herd immunity is very many infections, and that may end up happening," Ash told Radio 103FM on Sunday. "But we don't want to reach it by means of infections."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 California water restrictions amid drought
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/california-imposes-water-restrictions-drought-drags-82073534
GIST	<p>SACRAMENTO, Calif. -- For the second time in a decade, Californians will face mandatory restrictions governing their outdoor water use as the state endures another drought and voluntary conservation efforts have fallen short.</p> <p>The rules adopted Tuesday by the State Water Resources Control Board are fairly mild — no watering lawns for 48 hours after a rainstorm or letting sprinklers run onto the sidewalk— and could take effect as soon as the end of the month. Scofflaws could face \$500 daily fines, though regulators say they expect such fines will be rare, as they were in the last drought.</p> <p>The action comes as Californians have failed to meet Gov. Gavin Newsom's call for a voluntary 15% reduction in water use compared to last year. Between July and November, the state's water usage went down just 6%.</p> <p>The new restrictions follow an extremely wet December that state officials warned may not continue during the winter months that normally are the state's wettest. Weather patterns have become more unpredictable due to climate change and state climatologist Michael Anderson said forecasts show January, February and March could be drier than average.</p> <p>Earlier forecasts didn't predict such a wet December, which saw record amounts of rain and snow in many areas. In mid-December, about 80% of the state was in extreme or exceptional drought conditions. By the end of the month only about a third was experiencing those conditions, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor that tabulates conditions. Meanwhile, the state Department of Water Resources announced Tuesday that recent storms will allow the resumption of hydropower generation at the Oroville Dam, which was halted in early August due to historically low lake levels.</p> <p>Despite the rain, significant parts of the state's water system are still under stress from the extremely dry conditions earlier in 2021 that dropped many of California's largest reservoirs to record and near-record lows.</p> <p>"Conserving water and reducing water waste are critical and necessary habits for everyone to adopt as we adjust to these uncertainties and we build resilience to climate change, so adopting emergency regulations now just makes sense," said Eric Oppenheimer, chief deputy director for the state water board. "We need to be prepared for continued drought."</p> <p>Northern California was wetter than Southern California in November and conserved significantly more water.</p> <p>Regions north of the San Joaquin River, including Sacramento and San Francisco, used between 17% and 26% less water than November 2020, while Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties that account for 55% of the state's population used nearly 1% more, according to state data.</p> <p>Among the water uses that won't be allowed under the new rules: outdoor watering that results in excessive runoff into the street and sidewalks; using water for landscaping and irrigation during the 48 hours after storms that bring at least .25 inches (.63 centimeters) of rain; washing cars with hoses lacking</p>

shut-off nozzles; using potable water to wash driveways, sidewalks, buildings and patios and for street cleaning or to fill decorative fountains or lakes.

There are some exceptions. For example, trees in street medians can be watered, while turf cannot. The rules take effect once an administrative review is completed.

Though much of the U.S. West is in drought, no other western state has adopted statewide restrictions on residential water usage. Instead, it's local governments and water agencies in places like Denver and Las Vegas setting policies about when people can water their lawns. For example, the Las Vegas region adopted restrictions on planting grass, including banning it in front yards, in an effort to save water.

California adopted similar restrictions during the five-year drought that ended in 2017, and some cities and local water districts made them permanent. Such restrictions were just one piece of the state's conservation approach, which also included incentives for Californians to rip up water-hungry lawns in favor of drought-resistant landscaping.

Today, California's overall water use is lower than it was when the last drought began. But that makes conservation trickier this time, because some of the easiest measures have already been adopted. State water board officials were unable to say how many of California's nearly 40 million people are under such rules or exactly how much water they expect to save.

Though the regulations include an ability to fine violators up to \$500 per day, fines were rare last time around. The state has no plans to put "water cops" on the streets, Oppenheimer said, but he noted that during the last drought many local water districts beefed up staff to monitor conservation and compliance.

The state also has a website where individuals can report their neighbors or others they see violating the rules. The complaints will be directed to the relevant local water agency. During California's last drought, people engaged in so-called "drought shaming", the process of publicly outing people who are wasting water by posting videos to social media.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Seoul: NKorea fires ballistic missile into sea
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/seoul-north-korea-fires-projectile-sea-82077190
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea -- North Korea fired a suspected ballistic missile into its eastern waters on Wednesday, the South Korean and Japanese militaries said, the first such launch in about two months amid long-dormant international diplomacy on the North's nuclear program.</p> <p>The latest launch came after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to further boost his military capability at a high-profile ruling party conference last week.</p> <p>South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement North Korea fired a suspected ballistic missile toward its eastern waters on Wednesday morning. It said South Korean and U.S. intelligence authorities were trying to analyze more information about the launch.</p> <p>The Japanese Defense Ministry also detected the North Korean launch, saying the country likely fired a missile.</p> <p>"We find it truly regrettable that North Korea has continued to fire missiles from last year," Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told reporters.</p> <p>Kishida said other details about the North Korean launch weren't immediately available, including where the suspected missile landed and whether there had been any damage. He said he ordered officials to confirm the safety of ships and planes in the area where the suspected missile likely flew and fell.</p>

Wednesday's launch is the first such firing since North Korea tested a series of newly developed weapons between September and November including nuclear-capable missiles that place South Korea and Japan, both key U.S. allies in the region, within striking distance. Some experts said North Korea was applying more pressure on its rivals to accept it as a nuclear power state and to ease international sanctions on the country.

The Biden administration has repeatedly said it is open to resuming nuclear diplomacy with North Korea "anywhere and at any time" without preconditions. The North has so far rebuffed such overtures, saying U.S. hostility remains unchanged.

U.S.-led diplomacy aimed at convincing North Korea to abandon its nuclear program collapsed in 2019 due to wrangling over how much sanctions relief should be given to the North in return for dismantling its main nuclear complex, a limited denuclearization step. Kim has since threatened to enlarge his nuclear and missile arsenals.

During last week's plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party, Kim repeated his vows to boost his country's military capacity and ordered the production of more powerful, sophisticated weapons systems. State media dispatches on the meeting said North Korea set forth "tactical directions" for North Korea's external relations including with South Korea, but didn't elaborate. It made no mention of the United States.'

Last month, Kim marked 10 years in power. Since assuming control after his father and longtime ruler Kim Jong Il's death in December 2011, Kim Jong Un has established absolute power at home and bolstered his nuclear and missile arsenals. But his country's economy has been battered severely by the coronavirus pandemic, U.N. sanctions and mismanagement, though few experts question his grip on power.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Criticism: CDC clarifies isolation guidance
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/cdc-clarifies-isolation-guidance-criticism-call-testing/story?id=82071673
GIST	<p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Tuesday clarified its guidelines around what to do when you get COVID-19, a move that comes after criticism last week that their newest guidance to shorten the isolation down to five days without calling for a negative test was confusing and lax.</p> <p>The latest update still does not include a recommendation for people to get a negative COVID test before leaving isolation, but gives guidance for people who "have access" and "want to test" — language that reflects the challenges many Americans have faced in recent weeks trying to get their hands on them — while still holding ground that a negative rapid test isn't an all-clear.</p> <p>People who test positive after five days should isolate for another five days, the CDC says, while people who test negative should still follow the guidance for those who don't test: until day 10, wear a mask, avoid high-risk people, don't travel and don't eat or drink around others.</p> <p>The CDC said the decision was based on data that negative rapid tests do not necessarily mean someone has stopped spreading the virus, and PCR tests — the most accurate type — can't be relied on either, because they continue to show positive results for weeks afterward even when someone isn't contagious.</p> <p>"As such, regardless of the test result, wearing a well-fitting mask is still recommended," the guidance said.</p> <p>While more detailed, the updated guidance is not significantly different from last week's guidelines, which changed the recommended isolation period for a person with COVID from 10 days down to five, followed by five days of masking around other people. It applies to everyone, vaccinated or not, who gets COVID, so long as people are largely clear of symptoms by Day 5.</p>

But the decision rankled public health experts who thought a shorter isolation without a negative test would lead to more spread.

"CDC's new guidance to drop isolation of positives to 5 days without a negative test is reckless," Dr. Michael Mina, an epidemiologist and chief scientific officer at eMed tweeted last week following the initial announcement. "I absolutely don't want to sit next to someone who turned [positive] five days ago and hasn't tested [negative]."

Federal officials pushed back in the criticism, insisting that the new recommendations were based on science and not on social pressure.

"You can get people safely back out in a five-day period so long as they wear a mask if they are without symptoms. That is the science," Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical adviser to the White House, told ABC News last week. "The impact of that is to try and not be in a situation where we essentially have to shut down the entire country."

CDC Director Rochelle Walensky also defended the guidance, saying it was based on behavioral studies showing that only one-third of people were following the previous guidelines, and data showing up to 90% of COVID spread occurs in the first five days that someone has it.

"It really had a lot to do with what we thought people would be able to tolerate," she said in an interview last week with CNN.

And on Tuesday, the guidance largely stuck to that stance, though it further clarified what people should do in all scenarios, including if they decide to test.

Here's the latest:

If you get COVID, you should isolate for five days, the CDC says.

Day 0 is the first day of symptoms and day 1 is considered "first full day after your symptoms developed." For example, if you have symptoms on Monday, Tuesday is Day 1 and Saturday is Day 5.

If your case is asymptomatic, Day 0 is the day you tested positive. But the CDC's guidance on Tuesday clarified that if people test positive without any symptoms, and then develop symptoms in the days afterward, they should reset their isolation clock back to zero on the day they have symptoms and isolate for another five days.

After five full days, you can leave isolation if you are mostly all better. What does that mean? Fever-free and on the mend.

"You can end isolation after 5 full days if you are fever-free for 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medication and your other symptoms have improved," according to CDC guidance.

Loss of taste and smell, two common COVID symptoms, can last "for weeks or months after recovery" and do not qualify as symptoms that should keep you in isolation.

Then, after five days, you should wear a "well-fitting mask around others at home and in public for 5 additional days (day 6 through day 10) after the end of your 5-day isolation period," the guidance says.

If you're unable to mask, or if you can mask but will be around high-risk people, opt instead for the isolation, the CDC says.

"If you are unable to wear a mask when around others, you should continue to isolate for a full 10 days. Avoid people who are immunocompromised or at high risk for severe disease, and nursing homes and other high-risk settings, until after at least 10 days," according to the CDC.

If you still want to test, and can find one

As for the testing component, the CDC recommends that people who can and want to test should do so around day five, if they have been fever-free for 24 hours.

"If your test result is positive, you should continue to isolate until day 10," the guidance says.

And, importantly, a negative test is not an all-clear, according to the CDC.

"If your test result is negative, you can end isolation, but continue to wear a well-fitting mask around others at home and in public until day 10," the guidance says.

The CDC recommends against traveling, going anywhere where you are unable to wear a mask like restaurants and gyms, and avoid eating around people — both at home and in public — "until a full 10 days after your first day of symptoms," even with a negative test.

Walensky, asked about the guidance in an interview with "The Late Show" host Stephen Colbert on Monday night, said she would interpret even a negative test as possibly having "some transmissibility ahead of you."

"If you have access to a test, and if you want to do a test at day five, and if your symptoms are gone and you're feeling well, then go ahead and do that test," Walensky said.

"But here's how I would interpret that test. If it's positive, stay home for another five days. If it's negative, I would say you still really need to wear a mask. You still may have some transmissibility ahead of you," she said.

"You still should probably not visit grandma. You shouldn't get on an airplane. And you should still be pretty careful when you're with other people by wearing your mask all the time."

While the rollout of the guidance has been met with much criticism, experts have noted that its ultimately a fast-paced environment with no easy one-size-fits-all solution.

"The CDC is sending a mixed message -- but I don't think there's any way around that," Dr. David Dowdy, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, told ABC News.

"And I don't think we should be too quick to judge mixed messages in the context of a rapidly evolving situation. We want our guidelines to reflect the most recent knowledge we have, meaning that those guidelines are going to change, sometimes quickly," he said.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Alaska windstorm; power out amid freeze
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/alaska-windstorm-leaves-thousands-power-amid-freezing-temperatures/story?id=82070965
GIST	<p>Thousands of homes in southcentral Alaska are without power amid below-freezing weather after a persistent windstorm with gusts up to 90 mph blew through the area over the weekend, taking down power lines, damaging buildings and flipping semitrucks and small aircraft.</p> <p>Approximately 6,300 people in the Matanuska Susitna Valley -- a borough some 40 miles outside of Anchorage that encompasses Palmer, Wasilla and other smaller towns -- were without power as of Tuesday evening, according to the Matanuska Electric Association's outage map.</p> <p>At one point, around 22,000 customers were without power -- "practically the entire Valley," an MEA Facebook post read.</p>

The outages are especially dangerous as temperatures stay well below freezing in the area and a high wind warning is still in effect.

"We will have wind chill values 20 to 35 below zero expected in combination with the winds that we are currently experiencing," Aviva Braun, warning coordination meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Anchorage, said in a news conference Monday. "This could be dangerous and life-threatening for those without power, as frostbite can develop in as little as 15 minutes in these conditions."

Temperatures in Palmer and Wasilla on Tuesday morning were hovering around zero to 5 degrees with a wind chill factor that makes it feel like -15 degrees.

The high wind warning states that the area should continue to expect wind of 25 to 40 mph with gusts of 50 to 65 mph until Wednesday evening, according to the National Weather Service.

Residents should shelter in place for the duration of the storm, Matanuska-Susitna Borough Manager Mike Brown said in the Monday news conference.

The continuing wind is making it difficult for the electric company to restore power to customers. Support crews from electric companies in Anchorage and Fairbanks have come in to assist with restoration efforts, according to the MEA.

"We're unable to give any estimated times of restoration because the variables just keep changing as the wind keeps howling," the MEA said. But, the company added, "We will continue to work until we have everyone back on."

According to Braun, as of Monday, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough had seen 48 hours of sustained wind, making it the fourth-longest strong wind event in the area, comparable to the third-longest that occurred in February of 1979 with 51 hours of strong winds.

While some structures suffered significant damage -- including a combination KFC and A&W restaurant that had an entire wall ripped off and a grocery store where a burst pipe covered the building in ice -- most damage will not be like the collapses of structures that happen during storms like the [tornado that hit Mayfield, Kentucky](#), in December, borough manager Brown told ABC News.

There is damage to water pipes, roofing, siding, fences, vehicles, trailers and sheds.

"When you spread that out over an area as large as ours, when you add it all up, it's going to be pretty significant," Brown said. "Everyone is going to have something that they're going to have to deal with."

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough alone is approximately the size of West Virginia.

Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy issued a disaster emergency Monday, activating an assistance program for individuals and families who need help with disaster-related expenses.

"Alaskans, now is the time to check in with your neighbors and try to stay off the roads if possible," Dunleavy said in a press release. "I am always impressed with the ability Alaskans have to step up and help one another."

Brown told ABC News that once the borough gets through the storm and begins to focus on recovery, state officials will host meetings for the public to come in and learn more about what qualifies for the assistance and how to apply.

Shelters have been established in Palmer and Wasilla, and the borough launched a [severe weather website](#) with resources and information on how to stay safe.

	<p>Schools are closed Monday through Wednesday as conditions currently make it challenging to get students to school safely. The district will announce plans for the rest of the week on Wednesday.</p> <p>Along with the potential for frostbite -- symptoms of which include numbness and white or yellowish skin -- hypothermia is also a concern. Signs of hypothermia include shivering, exhaustion, confusion, fumbling hands, memory loss, slurred speech and drowsiness, according to the borough's resource site.</p> <p>Brown said Monday that the borough had "not yet received any reports of loss of life or significant injuries due to the storm."</p>
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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	01/04 McMenamins breach: 12yrs employees data
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/mcmenamins-data-breach-employee-info/177336/
GIST	<p>A ransomware attack on the McMenamins dining and hospitality empire in the Pacific Northwest came along with a data breach covering 12 years of employee data, the organization has confirmed.</p> <p>The Dec. 12 incident – which some have attributed to the Conti gang – forced McMenamins to shut down various operations, though locations can still receive customers. McMenamins is known for saving and restoring historic buildings throughout Oregon and Washington state and for giving them new lives as eclectic pubs, restaurants, breweries, hotels, movie theaters, concert venues, spas and more. In fact, 20 of its locations are on the National Register of Historic Places.</p> <p>This week, McMenamins confirmed that the cyberattackers made off with internal employee data for those working for the company between the dates of Jan. 1, 1998 and June 30, 2010. The affected data is a bouillabaisse of classic HR fare: names, addresses, telephone numbers, email addresses, dates of birth, race, ethnicity, gender, disability status, medical notes, performance and disciplinary notes, Social Security numbers, health insurance plan elections, income amounts, and retirement contribution amounts.</p> <p>The data could be sold and/or used for phishing attacks and other social-engineering efforts, identity theft and more.</p> <p>“It’s possible that the thieves accessed files containing direct-deposit bank account information as well, but McMenamins does not have a clear indication they did so,” the company said in a Dec. 30 notice.</p> <p>One ray of promise: No customer data was heisted, the company said.</p> <p>“We’re devastated our people need to do so, but we’re urging them to vigilantly monitor their accounts and healthcare information for anything unusual,” said Brian McMenamin, one of the brothers who own the business, in a press statement. “They should immediately notify their financial institutions or health providers if they see anything out of sort. They should sign up immediately for free monitoring and identity-theft protection. All the information is on our website, and we encourage them to call with any questions.”</p> <p>McMenamins said that it is offering past and current employees identity and credit-protection services, as well as a dedicated call center to answer questions about the attack. Letters have gone out to notify all affected individuals as well.</p> <p>Still Not Recovered from December Ransomware Attack</p> <p>In the wake of the attack, the company was forced to shut down its IT systems, credit-card point-of-sale systems and corporate email to prevent the further spread of the attack. Three weeks later, the company’s operations are still not remediated, it said, including its central phone system, email, credit-card processing, hotel-reservation system and gift-card processing – core functions for a hospitality group.</p>

For now, the company is asking people to delay their hotel bookings or to call properties directly, and it's using the third-party Dinerware point-of-sale for credit cards.

"It is unknown when the issue will be resolved and systems back up and running," the organization said. "Given the impacts to the company's email system, email responses are delayed."

Brian McMenamin said the breach "is especially disheartening" given its timing after the "strain and hardship" McMenamins' employees [have gone through](#) over the past two years during the pandemic.

McMenamins has reported the incident to the FBI and is also working with a cybersecurity firm to identify the source and full scope of the attack, the company said.

Some sources have [attributed the attack](#) to the Russian-speaking Conti gang – a group that Palo Alto Networks [has called](#) "one of the most ruthless" and sophisticated ransomware groups out there. Conti is known to ask for unreasonable ransom amounts, [such as](#) the \$40 million ransom demand it made of Broward County Public Schools in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., earlier this year. It also has a history of hitting organizations while they're down, as seen in a [May attack](#) on the Irish health service.

It also recently tinkered with its code (and its personnel recruiting) to [juice its ability](#) to find and fully destroy backups that victims may otherwise use to restore operations in the wake of a ransomware hit. And, in late December, Conti became one of the first professional gangs to [claim a full Log4Shell exploit chain](#).

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HEADLINE	01/04 Attack on Kronos disrupts payroll services
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/incident-response/cyberattack-on-payroll-vendor-kronos-disrupting-healthcare-workforce-paychecks
GIST	<p>The ongoing ransomware attack and recovery efforts on HR and payroll vendor Kronos is affecting payroll services at some health systems, which includes reduced paychecks for some healthcare employees, according to local news reports. The human resource and payroll vendor is widely used across the healthcare sector.</p> <p>On Dec. 13, Kronos began notifying its clients that it was facing the impacts of a ransomware attack on its private cloud platform, which hosts the vendor's Workforce Central, UKG TeleStaff, Healthcare Extensions, and Banking Scheduling solutions. The attack left those platforms unavailable, while Kronos worked to restore system availability for clients.</p> <p>Companies have been forced to manually track and estimate employee hours, in addition to issuing employees paper checks. On Dec. 21, Fitch Ratings noted the incident could possibly result in paycheck delays and determined healthcare would be most impacted by the Kronos disruption, given the widespread use of Kronos for payroll and workforce solutions across the sector.</p> <p>Local news outlets are reporting just that: some healthcare employees are finding discrepancies in their paychecks. Penn Highlands Healthcare has been providing regular updates on how the Kronos attack is affecting its payroll. In short, the time and attendance system outage will continue to impact payroll until the system is restored to full function.</p> <p>Kronos has not provided an updated timeframe for when that might occur. And the vendor can't advise clients on when the system will be again operational "since each of their thousands of clients must be reactivated individually," Penn Highlands officials explained.</p> <p>Penn Highlands employees are manually keeping track of their hours, then manually submitting them to supervisors. The outage is also causing delays with accruals. Employees have also been notified that those who are under- or overpaid will have their pay adjusted when Kronos goes back online.</p>

The University of Missouri Health Care has been facing similar issues. According to ABC KHQA in Columbia, Missouri, MU Health employees have been unable to clock their hours with the Kronos platform for a number of weeks, which has resulted in paychecks that don't include their full hours.

Some employees reported their paychecks only included half of their normal amount, with others finding even greater discrepancies. Not all hourly employees have been affected, but all workforce members have been encouraged to report issues to their supervisors.

The hospital's support team has been steadily working on the issue and monetary issues will be rectified within a few days. A spokesperson explained they're working to develop an alternative timekeeping system to reduce the amount of manual data entry to reduce similar issues.

Other healthcare entities have also been impacted, including Baptist Health, Monument Health, the University of Florida Health, OhioHealth, and Ascension St. Vincent. Monument Health was forced to manually reconstruct shift schedules to ensure the health system could continue operating its care services without interruption.

This week, Care New England reported that the cyberattack forced the health system to pay its 8,000 employees manually. The checks did not include overtime and holiday pay to ensure all workforce members were paid.

UF Health employees have reported similar paycheck issues to those disclosed by MU Health and Care New England.

"Kronos (not clients like us) is still trying to figure out the cloud issue but in the meantime the hospital is keeping track of all hours worked and is paying employees for all overtime, shift differential, etc., as soon as possible," according to UF Health. Until then, delays should be expected as timesheets are being filled out manually, "but every employee will be paid for all hours worked."

Other Kronos clients are reporting that some data was potentially accessed as a result of the attack, including the City of Cleveland.

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HEADLINE	01/04 DatPiff data breach impacts millions
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/have-i-been-pwned-warns-of-datpiff-data-breach-impacting-millions/
GIST	<p>The cracked passwords for almost 7.5 million DatPiff members are being sold online, and users can check if they are part of the data breach through the Have I Been Pwned notification service.</p> <p>DatPiff is a popular mixtape hosting service used by over 15 million users, allowing unregistered users to download or upload samples for free.</p> <p>The DatPiff data breach</p> <p>It is unclear when the data breach occurred, but the DatPiff database was first sold privately and then publicly on hacking forums in July 2020.</p> <p>The stolen DatPiff database contains 7,476,940 member records, including a user's email address, password, username, and security question.</p> <p>On November 30th, another data breach collector began selling the database again on the same hacking forum. However, this time, the passwords were dehashed to include the plain-text passwords along with the email address.</p> <p>User offering the data on a hacker forum</p>

Soon after, another threat actor released the database entirely for free, allowing any other threat actor to use the information.

The passwords in the database could be cracked because DatPiff hashed them with the MD5 algorithm, an old (1992) cryptographic hash function that is considered obsolete and insecure, especially for securing passwords.

To dehash MD5 passwords, crackers can compare hashes to known MD5 wordlists or use cracking tools to brute force the passwords.

BleepingComputer was told in December that a threat actor breached DatPiff using a website vulnerability scanner that allowed them access to the server.

However, it is believed that the threat actor did not breach the actual DatPiff website but rather a server with old database backup

What should DatPiff users do?

While this database is very old, if you have an account on DatPiff, it is strongly advised that you reset your password and use one unique and strong.

Those using the same password on other websites should change it there to avoid falling victim to credential stuffing attacks.

DatPiff members can search for their email addresses on the [Have I Been Pwned](#) data breach notification services to see if they are one of the over 7 million users impacted by this breach.

HIBP notice

At the time of writing this, DatPiff hasn't published a statement on this data breach incident, hasn't sent any notices to users, and hasn't forced a password reset.

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HEADLINE	01/04 UScellular discloses data breach
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/uscellular-discloses-data-breach-after-billing-system-hack/
GIST	<p>UScellular, self-described as the fourth-largest wireless carrier in the US, has disclosed a data breach after the company's billing system was hacked in December 2021.</p> <p>The mobile carrier said in data breach notification letters sent to 405 impacted individuals that the attackers also ported some of the affected customers' numbers using personal information stolen in the incident.</p> <p>"On December 13, 2021, UScellular detected a data security incident in 'which unauthorized individuals illegally accessed our billing system and gained access to wireless customer accounts that contain personal information,' the carrier explained.</p> <p>"Unauthorized individuals attempted to leverage access to that information to fraudulently port numbers. Based on our investigation, we believe that the incident occurred on December 13-19, 2021."</p> <p>After hacking into UScellular's CRM system, the attackers could also view customers' account information, including their phone numbers and addresses.</p> <p>"Information in customer accounts include name, address, PIN code and cellular telephone number(s) as well as information about wireless services including service plan, usage and billing statements," UScellular said.</p>

"Sensitive personal information, such as Social Security number and credit card information, is masked within the CRM system. At this time, we have no indication that there has been unauthorized access to your UScellular online user account."

Employee login credentials reset after the attack

While UScellular did not say if any of its employees' accounts were compromised in this security breach, the company reset an undisclosed number of retail store login employee credentials.

The mobile carrier also reset the impacted customers' security questions, answers, and personal identification numbers (PIN) linked to their accounts.

"Upon discovery of the incident, UScellular immediately disconnected the computer accessed by the unauthorized individuals from the internet and requested immediate removal from the internet of the fraudulent websites used by the fraudsters as part of the scheme," UScellular added.

Impacted UScellular customers are advised to be on the lookout for targeted phishing scams using personal information stolen from the company's CRM systems.

This is the second data breach that hit UScellular in 2021 after hackers were also able to [gain access to the carrier's CRM software](#) in January 2021.

Just as following the December breach, the threat actors were also able to successfully port some UScellular customers' numbers which would allow them to steal two-factor authentication codes sent via text messages and, potentially, hijack the victims' online accounts.

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HEADLINE	01/05 Microsoft code-sign check bypassed
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/microsoft-code-sign-check-bypassed-to-drop-zloader-malware/
GIST	<p>A new Zloader campaign exploits Microsoft's digital signature verification to deploy malware payloads and steal user credentials from thousands of victims from 111 countries.</p> <p>The campaign orchestrated by a threat group known as MalSmoke appears to have started in November 2021, and it's still going strong, according to Check Point researchers who have spotted it.</p> <p>Zloader (aka Terdot and DELoader) is a banking malware first spotted back in 2015 that can steal account credentials and various types of sensitive private information from infiltrated systems.</p> <p>More recently, Zloader has been used to drop further payloads on infected devices, including ransomware payloads such as Ryuk and Egregor.</p> <p>MalSmoke has explored various ways of distributing the info-stealing malware, ranging from spam mail and malvertising to using adult content lures.</p> <p>Abusing Atera remote management software</p> <p>In the most recent campaign, tracked and analyzed by researchers at Check Point, the infection begins with delivering a "Java.msi" file that's a modified installer of Atera.</p> <p>Atera is a legitimate enterprise remote monitoring and management software widely used in the IT sector. As such, AV tools are unlikely to warn the victim, even if the installer is slightly modified.</p> <p>It is unclear how the threat actors tricked the victims into downloading the malicious file, but it could be through cracks found on pirated software resources or spear-phishing emails.</p>

Upon execution, Atera creates an agent and assigns the endpoint to an email address under the threat actor's control.

The attackers then gains full remote access to the system, which allows them to execute scripts and upload or download files, most notably Zloader malware payloads.

Atera's remote monitoring solution comes with 30 days of a free trial, which is more than enough for the adversaries to carry out the attack.

Dropping Zloader

The batch scripts included in the malicious installer perform some user-level checks to ensure they have admin privileges, add folder exclusions to Windows Defender, and disable tools such as "cmd.exe" and the task manager.

Next, the following additional files are downloaded into the %AppData% folder:

- 9092.dll – the main payload, Zloader.
- adminpriv.exe – Nsudo.exe, which enables running programs with elevated privileges.
- appContast.dll – used to run 9092.dll and new2.bat.
- reboot.dll – also used to run 9092.dll.
- new2.bat – disables "Admin Approval Mode" and shuts down the computer.
- auto.bat – placed in the Startup folder for boot persistence.

Zloader is executed with "regsvr32.exe" and injected into the "msiexec.exe" process, which communicates with the C2 server (lkjhfgsdshja[.]com).

Finally, the "new2.bat" script edits the registry to set the privileges of all applications to the administrator level. For this change to take effect, a restart is required, so the malware forces the infected system to reboot at this point.

Microsoft code-signing checks bypassed

Check Point analysts [have confirmed](#) that the appContast.dll, which executes the Zloader payload and the registry-editing script carries a valid code signature, so the OS essentially trusts it.

The analysts compared the modified DLL with the original one (Atera's) and found slight modifications in the checksum and the signature size.

These subtle changes aren't enough to revoke the validity of the e-signature, but at the same time, allow someone to append data onto the signature section of a file.

Microsoft has known about this security gap since 2012 ([CVE-2020-1599](#), [CVE-2013-3900](#), and [CVE-2012-0151](#)) and has attempted to fix it by releasing increasingly stricter file verification policies. However, for some reason, these remain disabled by default.

You can find instructions on fixing this issue yourself by enabling stricter policies as detailed in this [legacy advisory](#).

Alternatively, you may paste the lines below into Notepad, save the file with the .reg extension and run it. Windows Registry Editor Version 5.00

```
[HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\Software\Microsoft\Cryptography\Wintrust\Config]
"EnableCertPaddingCheck"="1"
```

```
[HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE\Software\Wow6432Node\Microsoft\Cryptography\Wintrust\Config]
"EnableCertPaddingCheck"="1"
```

Primarily hit victims from North America

	<p>As of January 2, 2021, the latest Zloader campaign has infected 2,170 unique systems, with 864 having US-based IP addresses and 305 more from Canada.</p> <p>Although the number of victims doesn't seem alarmingly large, these attacks are highly-targeted and can cause significant damage to each victim.</p> <p>Because the infection vector is unknown, the best way to protect against this threat is to follow the policy tightening recommendations and use the IoCs (indicators of compromise) provided by Check Point's researchers for pro-active threat detection.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Hackers use video player to steal info
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/hackers-use-video-player-to-steal-credit-cards-from-over-100-sites/
GIST	<p>Hackers used a cloud video hosting service to perform a supply chain attack on over one hundred real estate sites that injected malicious scripts to steal information inputted in website forms.</p> <p>These scripts are known as skimmers or formjackers and are commonly injected into hacked websites to steal sensitive information entered into forms. Skimmers are commonly used on checkout pages for online stores to steal payment information.</p> <p>In a new supply chain attack discovered by Palo Alto Networks Unit42, threat actors abused a cloud video hosting feature to inject skimmer code into a video player. When a website embeds that player, it embeds the malicious script, causing the site to become infected.</p> <p>In total, Unit42 found over 100 real estate sites compromised by this campaign, showing a very successful supply chain attack.</p> <p>The researchers notified the cloud video platform and helped the infected sites clear their pages, but this campaign is an example of the ingenuity and determination of adversaries.</p> <p>Hacking once, infecting hundreds</p> <p>The cloud video platform involved in the attack allows users to create video players that include custom JavaScript scripts to customize the player.</p> <p>One such customized video player that is commonly embedded in real estate sites used a static JavaScript file hosted at a remote server.</p> <p>Unit42 researchers believe those threat actors gained access to the upstream JavaScript file and modified it to include a malicious skimmer script.</p> <p>On the next player update, the video player began serving the malicious script to all real estate sites that already had the player embedded, allowing the script to steal sensitive information inputted into website forms.</p> <p>The code itself is highly obfuscated, so it's unlikely to raise any suspicions at first glance or to be caught by unsophisticated security products.</p> <p>Upon deeper analysis, Unit42 found that the skimmer steals victim names, email addresses, phone numbers, and credit card information. This stolen information is then sent back to an attacker-controlled server, where the threat actors can collect it for further attacks.</p> <p>Its operational process can be summed up in the following three steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check whether the webpage load is done and call the next function.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read customer input information from the HTML document and call a data-validating function before saving it. • Send the collected data to the C2 (https://cdn-imgcloud[.]com/img) by creating an HTML tag and filling the image source with the server URL. <p>Palo Alto Networks has published a complete list of the IoCs (indicators of compromise) on this GitHub repository.</p> <p>An elusive threat</p> <p>This campaign deploys a polymorphic and continuously evolving skimmer that can't be stopped using conventional domain name and URL blocking methods.</p> <p>Website administrators who embed JavaScript scripts on their sites should not trust them blindly, even if the source has been proven to be trustworthy.</p> <p>Instead, admins are advised to conduct regular web content integrity checks and use form-jacking detection solutions.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 NKorea hackers target Russian diplomats
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/north-korean-hackers-attack-russian-diplomats-using-new-year-greetings/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>A North Korean cyber-espionage group has targeted Russian embassy diplomats over the winter holidays with emails carrying New Year greetings in the hopes of infecting them with malware.</p> <p>The attacks have been linked to a threat actor known as Konni, and have been taking place since at least December 20, cybersecurity firm Cluster25 said in a report published on Monday.</p> <p>“[T]hese emails used the New Year Eve 2022 festivity as decoy theme,” Cluster25 researchers said.</p> <p>“Contrary to its past actions, the North Korean APT group this time did not use malicious documents as attachments; instead, they attached a .zip file type named ‘поздравление.zip’, which means ‘congratulation’ in Russian, containing an embedded executable representing the first stage of the infection.”</p> <p>According to Cluster25, the ZIP files contained a Windows screensaver (.scr) file that, when executed, installed a screensaver with Russian holiday greetings, but also the Konni remote access trojan (RAT), the malware after which the group was named, and which granted the attacker full control over the infected systems.</p> <p>Cluster25 said it only detected emails sent to the Russian Embassy in Indonesia but the attack most likely targeted other embassies as well.</p> <p>To look as authentic as possible, Cluster25 said the emails were also spoofed using a @mid.ru account as the sender to pretend that the email came from the Russian Embassy in Serbia.</p> <p>The security firm said they’ve been tracking recent Konni attacks targeting Russian diplomats since at least August 2021, as part of a series of attacks first detected and detailed by Malwarebytes last year.</p> <p>All in all, attacks using Windows screensaver files have been heavily abused by malware operations in the early 2000s and might look too simplistic to work, but the reality is that non-technical users still fall for this technique, as it was the case last year with NFT creators.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Log4j flaw attack levels remain high
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SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/log4j-flaw-attacks-are-causing-lots-of-problems-microsoft-warns/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Microsoft has warned Windows and Azure customers to remain vigilant after observing state-sponsored and cyber-criminal attackers probing systems for the Log4j 'Log4Shell' flaw through December.</p> <p>Disclosed by the Apache Software Foundation on December 9, Log4Shell will likely take years to remediate because of how widely the error-logging software component is used in applications and services.</p> <p>Microsoft warns that customers might not be aware of how widespread the Log4j issue is in their environment.</p> <p>Over the past month, Microsoft has released numerous updates, including to its Defender security software, to help customers identify the issue as attackers stepped up scanning activity.</p> <p>"Exploitation attempts and testing have remained high during the last weeks of December. We have observed many existing attackers adding exploits of these vulnerabilities in their existing malware kits and tactics, from coin miners to hands-on-keyboard attacks," the Microsoft 365 Defender Threat Intelligence Team and the Microsoft Threat Intelligence Center (MSTIC) said in a January 3 update.</p> <p>Microsoft said customers should "assume broad availability of exploit code and scanning capabilities to be a real and present danger to their environments." Hence, it's encouraging customers to utilize scripts and scanning tools to assess their risk and impact.</p> <p>"Microsoft has observed attackers using many of the same inventory techniques to locate targets. Sophisticated adversaries (like nation-state actors) and commodity attackers alike have been observed taking advantage of these vulnerabilities. There is high potential for the expanded use of the vulnerabilities," Microsoft added.</p> <p>The flaw likely left some security teams without much of a break over Christmas and prompted warnings from the UK's NCSC to beware of burnout among staff responsible for remediation.</p> <p>Just ahead of New Year's Day, Microsoft rolled out a new Log4j dashboard for threat and vulnerability management in the Microsoft 365 Defender portal for Windows 10 and 11, Windows Server, and Linux systems. This system aims to help customers find and fix files, software and devices affected by Log4j vulnerabilities. CISA and CrowdStrike also released Log4j scanners ahead of Christmas.</p> <p>CISA officials believe hundreds of millions of devices are affected by Log4j. Meanwhile, major tech vendors such as Cisco and VMware continue to release patches for affected products.</p> <p>The Log4Shell vulnerabilities now include the original CVE-2021-44228 and four related flaws, the latest of which was CVE-2021-44832. However it was only a moderate severity issue addressed in the Log4j version 2.17.1 update on December 28. The Apache Software Foundation has details about each of the Log4j vulnerabilities in its advisory covering CVE-2021-44228, CVE-2021-45105, and CVE-2021-45046.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Saltzer Health: patient data exposed
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/saltzer-health-informs-patients-personal-information-exposure/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Intermountain Healthcare-owned Saltzer Health is informing patients that their personal information might have been compromised after an unauthorized party gained access to an employee email account.</p> <p>The organization, which operates 12 clinics and urgent care facilities in Boise, Caldwell, Meridian, and Nampa, Idaho, said the attackers had access to the employee email account between May 25 and June 1, 2021.</p>

An investigation into the incident revealed that the email account did contain personal information that was potentially compromised during the period of unauthorized access, the company said in a [statement](#).

Potentially affected information includes names and contact information, driver's license numbers and state identification numbers, and, in some cases, Social Security numbers and financial account details.

Medical information affected by the unauthorized access includes diagnosis, medical history, treatment details, prescription medication information, and physician information, along with health insurance information.

While Saltzer Health's statement does not provide information on the number of affected individuals, the organization told the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that 15,650 people were [potentially impacted](#) by the incident.

The organization says it has taken steps to mitigate the risk of data compromise within its environment, including resetting the affected email account's password and monitoring its network for any suspicious activity.

According to Saltzer Health, it hasn't received reports of identity theft or fraud following the incident.

"Saltzer Health encourages all individuals to remain vigilant against incidents of identity theft and fraud by reviewing account statements and explanation of benefits, and monitoring free credit reports for suspicious activity," the organization says.

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HEADLINE	01/04 FBI used Anom phones to collect GPS data
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/93b3ay/fbi-backdoor-anom-phones-gps-data
GIST	<p>Anom, an encrypted phone company marketed to criminals which the FBI secretly took over, surreptitiously recorded every message sent by the phones' users. But the truly global undercover operation had another secret: The phones also collected users' precise GPS location and transferred that information to authorities, according to multiple documents reviewed by Motherboard.</p> <p>The news provides more clarity on the scope and capabilities of the backdoor managed by the FBI. So far the operation, known as Trojan Shield in the U.S. and Ironside in Australia, has led to hundreds of arrests worldwide and disrupted organised crime, with major drug traffickers now either arrested or on the run.</p> <p>One document reviewed by Motherboard is a set of thousands of pages of Anom messages sent by an alleged drug trafficker who was arrested during the operation. Next to many of the messages, which are sorted in a spreadsheet, is the alleged GPS location of the phone recorded when the message was sent.</p> <p>This also includes when the alleged trafficker sent a photo or other file attachment across the Anom platform.</p> <p>A note written by authorities accompanying the material says that the Anom system was designed to always record this location information with the message data. Sometimes the system failed to record that data, the note adds. But during the operation, authorities confirmed in multiple cases that the successfully harvested GPS coordinates are generally reliable, because they accurately match location data collected in other ways, the note says. That, and there are also numerous cases where the actual content of the message, such as a photo, lines up with the GPS data, it adds.</p> <p>Motherboard also obtained a series of screenshots that purport to show GPS coordinates being transferred from Anom devices in the system's backend infrastructure.</p>

In a marketing message Anom sellers sent to potential and new clients and obtained by Motherboard, Anom said its phones not only had location services disabled, but that all code governing their use was removed from Anom's custom operating system called ArcaneOS.

In the settings for [an Anom device obtained by Motherboard](#), there is no option to turn location services on or off. To the user, it appears that the phones are not collecting or using location information at all.

In 2018, [the FBI arrested Vincent Ramos](#), the CEO of Phantom Secure, which was an established vendor in the encrypted phone industry. After that arrest, a confidential human source (CHS) offered the FBI their own in-development encrypted phone firm called Anom, [Motherboard reported in July](#). Authorities and the CHS then introduced the backdoor to secretly capture users' messages.

After the Phantom Secure shutdown, criminals moved to other platforms, including Anom. Then in 2020 and 2021, European authorities launched technical operations against two other providers [called Encrochat and Sky](#). The U.S. Department of Justice also indicted Sky's CEO Jean-François Eap. After both of these operations, which each obtained hundreds of millions messages from the respective platforms, more users migrated to Anom, catapulting its popularity in the criminal underworld. Eventually, Anom was a global enterprise with around 11,800 phones, according to court records.

In December [Motherboard published material from inside Anom itself](#), including a video of an Anom seller loading phones with ArcaneOS. Other files showed the bureaucracy and structure of Anom: Workers recorded the number of devices to be shipped to various countries and to which distributors, such as 200 phones to a seller in Australia, or 60 for another in Sweden. Court records say that the CHS controlled the distribution of Anom devices in consultation with the FBI.

That file showed it was also edited by Hakan Reis, also known as Hakan Ayik. Ayik is an alleged drug trafficker who became famous in Australia for flaunting his wealth and successful escape from the authorities on social media. After announcing Operation Trojan Shield, the Department of Justice [unsealed an indictment against Ayik](#) and over a dozen other people who allegedly helped sell Anom phones.

The FBI declined to comment on the Anom devices also harvesting GPS data. Kelly Thornton, director of media relations at the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of California, also declined to comment.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Deal reached w/carriers 5G cellular service
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/technology/5g-att-verizon-rollout.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Technology
GIST	<p>Federal aviation officials have agreed not to ask for further delays to Verizon and AT&T's new 5G cellular service, clearing the way for the companies to start their service while avoiding a major clash with regulators who said it could endanger flights.</p> <p>In addition to delaying the start of their service by two weeks, the carriers will temporarily put in place measures designed to address the government's safety concerns about the technology, particularly around certain airports.</p> <p>The agency had expressed concerns that the new 5G service uses signals that clash with equipment pilots use to land in poor weather. Officials have said they could restrict the use of that equipment, known as radio altimeters, which could force airlines to ground or reroute flights under some conditions.</p> <p>The new 5G service uses a portion of the airwaves, called C-Band, to operate; planes use an adjacent set of radio waves for their radio altimeters. The aviation industry has said the two signals could clash, with potentially dangerous results.</p>

In a letter to the wireless companies on Monday night, federal officials said that absent “unforeseen” safety issues with the technology, they “will not seek or demand any further delays” in turning on the new technology.

“We are confident that your voluntary steps will support the safe coexistence of 5G C-Band deployment and aviation activities, helping to retain America’s economic strength and leadership role around the world,” said Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and the administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration, Stephen Dickson, in a letter to the chief executives of the two companies.

The agreement forestalls a collision this week between AT&T and Verizon, which initially planned to debut the service on Wednesday, and the federal regulators who said they could restrict flights if their concerns were not met. The nation’s airlines had said that the restrictions could disrupt hundreds of thousands of passenger flights, not long after holiday travel was dogged by delays and cancellations driven by staff shortages and weather.

“Last night’s agreement is a significant step in the right direction, and we’re grateful to all parties for their cooperation and good faith,” President Biden said in a statement on Tuesday. “This agreement ensures that there will be no disruptions to air operations over the next two weeks and puts us on track to substantially reduce disruptions to air operations when AT&T and Verizon launch 5G on January 19th.”

Under the agreement, the wireless carriers will follow through on their pledge to operate 5G stations at a lower power than they otherwise plan to. They will reduce the power even more around “no more than 50 priority airports,” according to the agreement.

The F.A.A. said it would assess whether some radio altimeters could be safely used even with the 5G service, potentially exempting those devices from future restrictions and limiting the number of planes that would face delays or cancellations.

Airlines for America, a lobbying group, had threatened to go to court to block the new 5G service. In a statement, Nicholas E. Calio, the organization’s chief executive, said it would “continue to work with all stakeholders to help ensure that new 5G service can coexist with aviation safely.”

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HEADLINE	01/04 Portugal media outlets hit in cyberattack
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/portugal-expresso-sic-impresa-ransowmare-lapsus/
GIST	<p>The websites of the top newspaper and TV station in Portugal remained down Tuesday after a cyberattack that began over the weekend, following in a string of recent attacks on media organizations.</p> <p>Impresa Group said its Expresso newspaper and SIC TV stations were the victim of a computer attack. A ransomware group suspected as the culprit, known as Lapsus\$, initially defaced the websites with a ransom demand.</p> <p>The outfit also sent tweets from Expresso’s Twitter account to declare itself the president of Portugal, and sent text messages to the news organizations’ customers hyping its success in an apparent bid to pressure its victims into paying.</p> <p>“For safety reasons, we ask that you do not access or forward any of the various communications that are being sent on behalf of the Impresa group brands,” the company said in a Facebook post on Monday. “We continue to take necessary actions and measures to resolve the situation as soon as possible.”</p> <p>It’s one of a number incidents afflicting media organizations in the past couple weeks, although none of the attacks seem connected. The Jerusalem Post was hacked and defaced on Monday. The largest news organization in Norway got hit last week.</p> <p>It’s also among several more publicly-reported suspected ransomware attacks on media entities over the past several months. “Most ransomware attacks are not targeted, so it is likely there are security</p>

deficiencies shared by other media orgs,” [tweeted Allan Liska](#), director of threat intelligence at the Record Future cybersecurity firm.

The Lapsus\$ Group apparently [struck Brazil’s health ministry](#) in December, and may have the same month [been connected to a hack of the Federal Police](#) there.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	01/04 DHS: domestic extremists very grave threat
SOURCE	https://news.yahoo.com/dhs-chief-says-domestic-extremist-223836396.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON – The nation's top homeland security official said Tuesday that violent domestic extremists remain a "very grave" threat to the country, but there are no specific warnings associated with the anniversary of the Jan. 6 Capitol attack.</p> <p>“We are not aware of any specific, credible threats at this point related to Jan. 6, 2022,” Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told reporters on a conference call. “But at the same time we are operating at a heightened level of vigilance because we are at a heightened level of threat. The threat of domestic violent extremists is a very grave.”</p> <p>DHS came under fire in the wake of the Jan. 6 attack for failing to issue warnings about the potential for violence, despite prolific online threats. Mayorkas, who took office in February, acknowledged the criticism and said the department had since enhanced its ability to prevent, detect and respond to threats from domestic violent extremism.</p> <p>“Over the past year, we ... have improved and strengthened our approach to combatting this dynamic, evolving threat,” Mayorkas said.</p> <p>Mayorkas said individual extremists or loosely organized groups using encrypted apps on social media is what makes the threat difficult to combat.</p> <p>“We are very focused on the lone actor or a loose affiliation of individuals rather than necessarily an organized structure with a set and defined hierarchy,” Mayorkas said. “That’s what can make the threat so challenging to address.”</p> <p>Among the steps Mayorkas touted were greater coordination with state and local governments, and greater funding to help communities combat extremism. The department created an intelligence branch specifically for domestic terrorism and issued 80 advisories and bulletins during the last year.</p> <p>The department also distributed more funding, including \$180 million in Federal Emergency Management Agency grants to help nonprofit organizations, such as religious institutions, protect themselves, and another \$20 million for 37 terrorism prevention grants for communities to address targeted violence.</p> <p>A Senate report in June found DHS never produced an intelligence report or warning specific to the Jan. 6 joint session of Congress. On that day, a mob of supporters of former President Donald Trump breached the Capitol in an effort to stop the formal certification of Joe Biden's electoral victory.</p> <p>Federal intelligence officials later told Congress that it was difficult to discern credible threats from the stream of online bravado and constitutionally protected speech. But the officials, from the FBI and DHS, said they had produced more than a dozen “broad strategic warnings” about domestic violence extremism and related to the 2020 election and transition.</p> <p>John Cohen, a DHS intelligence and counterterrorism official, said foreign actors have also continued to try to exacerbate divisions in the U.S. over a host of hot button issues. He named ongoing efforts by China,</p>

	Iran, Russia and other countries to sow disinformation about the 2020 election, the government response to COVID-19, immigration issues and racial tensions.
	“They’re hoping to undermine credibility in the government,” Cohen said.
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HEADLINE	01/04 Terrorism trends to watch in 2022
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/featured/5-terrorism-trends-to-watch-in-2022/
GIST	<p>If you want a consistent point of agreement among counterterrorism professionals to describe the lay of the land over the past year, start with the word “evolution”: a terror landscape that is as complex as it is dynamic, shifting with the political tides and ungoverned spaces, willing to set aside short-term satisfaction as needed for long-term gains, cultivating new extremists from current events, and hungrily feeding on the escalation of disinformation. Terror groups and extremist movements evolved into long-distance training before the pandemic hampered travel, found new methods of communication to evade social media bans or learned how to make extremism palatable enough to lure recruits while not triggering the censors, and embraced the remotely inspired lone actor as not a fallback plan but a frontline soldier. What worked best for extremists even just a few years ago has likely been adjusted based on new technologies, new trends in recruitment and incitement, and new realities on local and global stages.</p> <p>A year ago, my annual piece detailing terror trends to watch in the months ahead singled out conspiracy theory extremism as the top concern – it was published on Jan. 5, 2021, a day before the Capitol attack. The Jan. 6 riot did not materialize out of thin air, underscoring how critical it is to study trends in extremism and assess how they might figure into future violent action by lone actors or groups in the year ahead and beyond.</p> <p>Extremists Helping Extremists</p> <p>Recent hate-crimes cases highlighted by the Justice Department reflected perpetrators allegedly engaging in the same sort of preparation and planning as one might expect from lone-actor terrorists. In Oregon, a man was charged in November with luring and beating a gay victim with a wooden club after viewing violent anti-gay materials online, researching how to plan and execute a killing online, and purchasing the weapon on the internet.</p> <p>Last month, a New York man who had long been engaged in sending threats to the LGBTQ community allegedly promised a strategic attack on the 2021 New York City Pride March with “firepower” that would “make the 2016 Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting look like a cakewalk.” The allegations aren’t just notable for their brutality, but for their shared characteristics with other extremist lone actors who have progressed from spouting ideology to fomenting and executing violence – from consumption of extremist propaganda and inspiration drawn from other terrorist attacks to weapons acquisition and target selection.</p> <p>Extremists helping extremists isn’t about merging seemingly conflicting ideologies, though some have shown a willingness to embrace the enemy of their enemy and disregard some core differences to achieve a shared goal. It’s about cross-pollination: learning best practices from terrorists who have gone before including selection of targets and tactics, recruitment and propaganda strategies, utilization of disinformation, and communication between like-minded adherents. ISIS rolled with the social media era and transformed terror propaganda, online recruitment, and incitement into a whole new beast, trying to make terror look cool with stylized production values and an emphasis on diverse recruitment; this spawned independent media groups that churn out more ISIS content than tech companies or law enforcement can handle. Propaganda operations aren’t happening in silos. Far-right groups that became more active in online forums and physical operations such as leafleting on college campuses have borrowed from this general blueprint of production and dissemination using a full-court press of forums, social media, messaging apps, placing propaganda on file-sharing sites, and more. And both extremist movements deploy propaganda that often skirts so closely to seemingly innocuous topics that they can do stealthier recruitment ops.</p>

Even if disparate groups don't cooperate with each other – like the Boogaloo Bois who pleaded guilty to trying to [strike an arms deal](#) with what they thought was Hamas in order to fund a 'Boojahideen' training camp – they can complement each other. It matters not so much what different extremists believe as what their goals are and how they could be useful to each other in accomplishing those goals. Even if white supremacist groups shudder at the thought of even going near a mosque unless to commit a massacre like in Christchurch, there is an admiration for what ISIS has accomplished and a desire to emulate methods that will also stoke fear, lure recruits, grow their base, and incite attacks. And vice-versa: Damon Joseph, [sentenced](#) to 20 years in September for plotting to attack Toledo synagogues on behalf of ISIS, [told](#) an undercover agent that he admired the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue mass shooting and “can see myself carrying out this type of operation.”

Shared themes one sees across Islamist, white supremacist, accelerationist, and eco-fascist propaganda often include using current events to stoke grievances and ultimately recruitment, vowing ideological dominion, pressing conspiracy theories in order to accelerate slides toward extremism, using action-film-style imagery of training or operations, highlighting past attacks conducted by any type of group to show extremists how much suffering they can also inflict, using anti-government and revenge themes, promoting weapons and tactics, threatening social media over deplatforming, and displaying antisemitism or misogyny along with hatred toward minority communities, the LGBTQ community, or religious groups. The danger is that these groups learn from each other and share best practices, even if not overtly, and conduct attacks that complement each other's goals.

Midterm Election Violence

Not that long ago, the prospect of violence marking a midterm election season – in which voters often can't be stirred to even head to the polls – would have been a farfetched prediction. But the aftermath of the last presidential election was violent enough to raise concerns about the prospect of extremist violence connected to this year's House and Senate elections, and even contests on a state or local level all the way down to school boards. The Jan. 6 Capitol attack continues to be a focus of conspiracy theorists who claim it was a false-flag operation, and is also lifted up by those who acknowledge the actual perpetrators but brand it as a sort of martyrdom operation while calling the hundreds arrested for their activities that day political prisoners. Even al-Qaeda couldn't resist trying to stoke more political violence, [telling](#) “the raiders of the Congress” in a video after the Capitol attack that they and similar groups “will find what they need in the *Inspire* magazine issued by the mujahideen in the Arabian Peninsula.” What's in *Inspire*, which is easily found online? Recipes for bombs and other devices, tactical advice on target and weapons selection, practical considerations for lone-actor terrorists, etc.

It's alarming not just that violence was employed in an effort to stop the certification of election results, but that many Americans just assume extremist violence will now be the way things are in future elections. A new CBS News-YouGov [poll](#) found that 62 percent of respondents expect violence from the losing side in future presidential elections, and 14 percent said that political candidates or officials could be justified in calling for violent action. In November, Reuters released an [article](#) in which reporters tracked down and spoke with people who had harassed and threatened election officials – a piece that was jarring not just for the content of the violent threats but for the frankness of many of the perpetrators who went on record with their names to discuss, justify or downplay what they did to terrify these election workers.

It's a stark reminder that election security is not just about cyber-securing the integrity of the vote but physical protection of government sites, polling places, political rallies or campaign stops, workplaces and private homes of election officials and workers, and more as the potential for violence lurks before, during, and after the vote.

Islamist Terror Adapts

When we talk about a shifting terror landscape, Islamist terror groups are undoubtedly anxious or eager to see what the new year has in store. While noting damaging losses of leadership or territory, counterterrorism professionals in the federal government roundly describe ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their ideological brethren as not just in a state of evolution but as resilient, adaptive, and determined. Their domain is not limited to the former so-called caliphate straddling Iraq and Syria or enclaves in Yemen or

southern Asia, but increasingly [stretches into corners of Africa](#) and even the recently designated [al-Qaeda network in Brazil](#).

In Afghanistan, where the Taliban is more concerned with [beheading clothing-store mannequins](#) than they will ever be about reining in their al-Qaeda allies, the terror landscape is volatile at best. ISIS declared that its Aug. 26 attack outside Hamid Karzai International Airport, which killed 169 Afghan civilians and 13 U.S. service members, “heralded the start of a new phase” of “eternal jihad,” with the bombing “dispelling the illusions of peace-bearers and drawing a map of light for a new stage” as they hoped the attack will draw more ISIS recruits in their claimed Khorasan province from the ranks of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Islamist terror groups’ revolutionary use of the internet – pathways carved out for other extremists to emulate – means that they still exercise significant narrative control when it comes to wooing new followers and inspiring attacks. ISIS propaganda this past year called for lone actors during wildfire season to [deploy fire as a weapon](#) by using accelerants concealed in apple juice containers to start blazes of remote parked cars, and to [take advantage](#) of what they assumed would be distracted law enforcement after civil unrest at the Capitol. An al-Qaeda magazine marking 20 years since the 9/11 attacks [encouraged](#) lone or paired attackers to try to emulate the operation that was carefully planned for years by the terror group, arguing that the tactic of using planes as weapons is “an open door even to lone wolves.” Perhaps one of the most impactful threats to be felt from al-Qaeda this year will be their aforementioned concerted effort to dip into the domestic extremist threat – which could be seen as hollow sideline encouragement if not for the trove of English-language distance-learning materials produced over the years by the group that are readily available online.

Critical Infrastructure Threats

The 2021 ransomware attacks on Colonial Pipeline and JBS meat processing plants underscored the economic impacts of attacks on critical infrastructure, and that the cyber battlefield is not just the domain of nation-state actors. But these crippling impacts also provide a guide or simply inspiration for extremists who often openly discuss how physical attacks on critical infrastructure could be a force multiplier – expanding the impact of an attack beyond one targeted location or one attacker, and inflicting everything from inconvenience to death on victims. Think of the impact that an outside attacker or insider threat could have on the safety of gas pipelines, the security of dangerous chemicals, the integrity of a dam, the contamination of food or water, or the ability of a healthcare facility to function.

A National Socialist Order (formerly known as the neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division) video posted on Telegram in 2020 used simple animation to encourage followers to identify allies and enemies and finally act – and the first “act” depicted an individual chucking an incendiary device at a power substation that subsequently bursts into flames. The video, which also depicted a vehicle attack on a crowd and an assassination of a person behind a podium, encouraged followers to educate themselves with books such as *The Turner Diaries* before attacking. One social media account that was sharing accelerationist memes and references to the Boogaloo Bois posted an animated meme depicting a masked shooter in front of a power substation to the tune of “Electric Avenue.” Another meme posted on YouTube in April 2020 and circulated in other online forums asked people to “repost if you would dismantle the electrical transmission grid with your male followers” and included a short video showing an unknown individual blowtorching the leg of a transmission tower. And last year ISIS executed its longtime threats against the energy sector with attacks on generating units and high-voltage lines in Iraq, as well as attacks on transmission towers supplying power to part of Baghdad’s water system — using one critical infrastructure sector to cripple another.

A superseding [indictment](#) filed in August against a group composed of former and active-duty military along with members of the now-defunct Iron March neo-Nazi online forum alleges that they discussed attacking the power grid both “for the purpose of creating general chaos and to provide cover and ease of escape in those areas in which they planned to undertake assassinations and other desired operations to further their goal of creating a white ethno-state.” The accused also “discussed using homemade thermite to burn through and destroy power transformers” and “researched, discussed and critically reviewed at length a previous attack on the power grid by an unknown group,” the indictment states. “That group used assault-style rifles in an attempt to explode a power substation.” That attack is not named but can be

assumed to be the 2013 attack in which multiple gunmen opened fire on the Pacific Gas and Electric Company's Metcalf Transmission Substation south of San Jose, Calif., causing more than \$15 million in damage to 17 transformers; the perpetrators have not been caught and the incident is commonly referenced in online extremist discussions about critical-infrastructure vulnerabilities.

The Disinformation-Terrorism Nexus

As we approach the first anniversary of the attack on the Capitol, with [704 federal cases as of today](#) against individuals involved in the siege, the term Jan. 6 "believers" is used on social media to derisively refer to people who believe the official facts about what happened that day instead of conspiracy theories alleging a false-flag operation intended to make protesters look bad. Despite 22 percent of the defendants in Jan. 6 cases already pleading guilty, and one man indicted on charges of assaulting four police officers [fleeing to Belarus](#) to avoid prosecution, disinformation not only keeps a narrative alive for the sake of those invested in the mythology but can incite fervent believers of the disinformation or conspiracy theory to further violent action. As FBI Director Christopher Wray [told](#) lawmakers at a September hearing, "Today, terrorism moves at the speed of social media. And you have the ability of lone actors disgruntled in one part of the country to spin up similar or like-minded individuals in other parts of the country and urge them into action or inspire them into action." The CBS News-YouGov poll found that half of respondents who ascribe to QAnon beliefs approve of the attack on the Capitol.

Like terrorism, disinformation operates to deliberately further a cause, belief, or group, and both domestic and international extremist movements have learned how important information warfare is to their efforts. Over the past year, we've seen disinformation stoke anger in a way that at the very least can lead to verbal sparring and can escalate into threats or extremist plots – one of the key dangers of disinformation is when it motivates people into thinking they need to take violent action to be saviors and eliminate the wrongly perceived threat. Healthcare workers were lauded for their selflessness and sacrifice at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but after several spin cycles of disinformation centering largely on the introduction of lifesaving vaccines or simple pandemic-control measures such as masking the harassment, threats, and assaults against healthcare employees have been alarming. About 300 public health department leaders have left their jobs since the beginning of the pandemic, the National Association of County and City Health Officials noted in an October [letter](#) to Attorney General Merrick Garland, as "in many cases, they have been verbally abused and physically threatened; their personal information has been shared, their families targeted, and their offices attacked."

One speaker at anti-vaccination rally on Staten Island in October [threatened](#) that "town halls and schools will be f—king burned to the ground" over vaccine mandates, with the crowd cheering as he declared "there are plenty of people that are ready to go there" down the path of violence. Disinformation labors tirelessly to push people to that point. Last month, police in Germany [announced](#) that they had foiled a plot to assassinate government officials and seized "crossbows, parts of weapons, and weapons" during multiple raids: "The members of the chat group, which links opponents of vaccination, the state, and the current anti-pandemic policy, stated plans of murdering the premier of Saxony and other representatives of the Saxony government, both in the group and in non-virtual meetings," police said in a statement.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Taliban: future army w/suicide bombers
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/qbjvyp/taliban-army-will-include-suicide-bombers
GIST	<p>The future army of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) will include a special battalion of suicide attackers, according to a spokesperson from the Taliban regime.</p> <p>Zabiullah Mujahid, the IEA's deputy minister of information and culture, told Radio Azadi that the suicide unit will be active under the Ministry of Defense and will be part of the Taliban's special forces.</p> <p>The declaration follows previous, unconfirmed reports that the Taliban had formed a battalion of suicide bombers to help fight and prevent border conflicts, particularly at the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border in the northeastern Badakhshan province. Mullah Nisar Ahmad Ahmadi, deputy governor of Badakhshan, told media in October that the battalion was named Lashkar-e-Mansoori, or "Mansoor army," and was the</p>

same as the one that would conduct suicide attacks targeting the security forces of the previous Afghan government, as well as their Western allies.

Ahmadi further claimed that the suicide bomber battalion was instrumental to the Taliban's victory over the United States and its subsequent takeover of Afghanistan.

"The defeat of the U.S. would not be possible if not for this battalion," he said. "These brave men would wear explosive waistcoats and would detonate the U.S. bases in Afghanistan. These are people with literally no fear who devote themselves for the consent of Allah."

Suicide attacks have become a key military tactic for the Taliban, who first embraced the practice in 2003 as they launched an insurgency campaign against U.S. forces. According to a [2021 study](#), the group has since claimed more suicide bombings than any other terrorist organisation in history.

"[Suicide bombings are] very important [to the Taliban], because this was one of their main instruments in harassing the U.S. and allied forces and inflicting fatalities," Amin Saikal, adjunct professor of social sciences at the University of Western Australia and former Director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, told VICE World News.

By declaring the formation of an official suicide battalion, Saikal explained, IEA's Taliban rulers are sending a firm message to the U.S. and its allies: "If you are going to continue the pressure on us ... then we will be able to unleash our suicide bombers against you."

"This [suicide corps] is very much a defensive force; a deterrent force, to basically deter any internal hostilities or external aggression towards the Taliban," said Saikal. "They are basically sending a signal to opposition inside Afghanistan, and opposition outside the country, that if you are going to destabilise our rule in the country, and if you are not really going to come to terms with us, and you engage in hostile actions towards us, then we will be prepared to make use of such a force in order to counter your opposition and your aggression."

Other experts have highlighted the problems posed by the Taliban's ongoing embrace and praise of suicide attacks, especially as the new and untested government seeks to unite the Afghan population and curry favour with the international community, which is crucial to fend off an [accelerating economic and humanitarian crisis](#). In the weeks and months following the fall of Kabul, the Taliban government – which is still yet to gain official recognition from any other nation – was eager to show a more moderate face to the global community, reshaping its image and casting itself as a peaceful and diplomatic improvement on the old model.

But as William Maley, emeritus professor of diplomacy at the Australian National University, told VICE World News, Mujahid's announcement of an official suicide corps "highlights the naïveté of the suggestion that there had emerged a 'Taliban 2.0', different from the version of the Taliban that was on display between their emergence in 1994 and their overthrow in 2001."

Saikal agreed. "I think this will be very roundly condemned," he told VICE World News. "No country will be prepared to recognise or give any credibility to a military force that includes a suicide brigade."

The Taliban is not the only group that is deploying suicide bombers – even within Afghanistan. In late August, as Western forces were evacuating Afghanistan and thousands of civilians were desperately attempting to flee the country, a militant from Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) [detonated a suicide bomb](#) at Hamid Karzai International Airport, killing himself and nearly 200 others.

More recently, on December 23, Kabul police [said they shot dead](#) a would-be suicide bomber outside Kabul's main passport office as about 200 Taliban fighters lined up for travel documents. The attack was one of several launched against the Taliban since their return to power, most of which have been claimed by the local chapter of the Islamic State.

	<p>Saikal said it's possible that the Taliban will use some of its suicide bombers against Islamic State targets. Maley, however, was less certain.</p> <p>"It is not clear against which organised enemies a Taliban campaign of suicide bombing might be directed," he said. "More worrying is the likelihood that the Taliban, in no position to win generalised normative support ('legitimacy'), will resort to high-level coercion against ordinary Afghans to ensure compliance with Taliban demands."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 France terror probe: Dakar rally explosion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/04/dakar-rally-explosion-france-terror-investigation-racing-driver-philippe-boutron
GIST	<p>French prosecutors have opened a terrorism investigation after a car participating in the Dakar rally was hit by an explosion in Saudi Arabia last week that badly wounded its driver.</p> <p>After the 30 December attack in the city of Jeddah, the driver, Philippe Boutron, underwent surgery in Saudi Arabia for serious leg injuries before returning to France.</p> <p>"A preliminary investigation has been opened into multiple attempted killings in connection with a terrorist group," national anti-terror prosecutors said in a statement on Tuesday.</p> <p>The statement added that all five occupants of the car including the driver were French. It gave no further details over the blast.</p> <p>Organisers had said that the incident was not related to racing while Saudi authorities had indicated there was no criminal suspicion over the explosion.</p> <p>But France's foreign ministry then updated its advice on Saudi Arabia, contradicting comments about the incident made by both the Saudi authorities and the organisers.</p> <p>"An appeal for maximum alertness – security risk," it said on its website after the blast.</p> <p>"An investigation by Saudi authorities is under way to determine the cause of this explosion. The possibility of a criminal act has not been ruled out," it added.</p> <p>The famous race, formerly known as the Paris-Dakar, but now just as the Dakar, used to be staged from the French capital following a route to the Senegalese capital Dakar.</p> <p>But security threats along its route in north Africa meant that from 2009 it was held in South America and from 2020 in Saudi Arabia.</p> <p>The final stage of this year's edition – known as the Dakar 2022 – is to take place on 14 January.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/05 Rocket hits base near Baghdad airport
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/rocket-hits-military-base-near-baghdad-airport-no-casualties-military-2022-01-05/
GIST	<p>BAGHDAD, Jan 5 (Reuters) - A Katyusha rocket hit an Iraqi military base hosting U.S. forces near Baghdad's international airport on Wednesday, Iraqi security and military sources said.</p> <p>An Iraqi military statement said it found a rocket launcher with one rocket in al-Jihad district in western Baghdad near the airport.</p> <p>The sources said that nobody was hurt in the incident.</p>

	<p>U.S. officials have warned in recent weeks they expected an uptick in attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, in part because of the second anniversary of the killing of top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani.</p> <p>While there were no immediate claims of responsibility for recent attacks, Iraqi militia groups aligned with Iran vowed to retaliate for killing Soleimani and Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.</p> <p>Wednesday's attack is the second one this week targeting the base near Baghdad's international airport after an attack by two drones was foiled on Monday.</p> <p>Two explosive-laden drones were also shot down on Tuesday by Iraq's air defenses as they approached the Ain al-Asad air base, which hosts U.S. forces, west of Baghdad.</p> <p>Soleimani was killed on Jan. 3, 2020 in a drone strike near Baghdad airport ordered by then-U.S. president Donald Trump.</p> <p>Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said on Monday that Trump must face trial for the killing or Tehran would take revenge.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/03 Pakistan: Afghan border fence to continue
SOURCE	https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-vows-to-continue-fencing-afghan-border-downplays-taliban-disruptive-acts-/6379947.html
GIST	<p>Pakistan said Monday it was engaging with Afghanistan's Taliban rulers through diplomatic channels to resolve "some confusions" stemming from the installation of a security fence on the porous border separating the two countries.</p> <p>Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told a news conference in Islamabad that his country was determined to protect its "interests" and continue unilateral fencing Pakistan's nearly 2,600-kilometer border with Afghanistan.</p> <p>The Pakistani chief diplomat was responding to recent attempts by Taliban border forces aimed at preventing Pakistan from building the barrier. The latest such incident apparently happened over the weekend when the Afghan side dismantled a portion of the fence.</p> <p>"We are not silent. We have installed the fence and, God willing, this effort will continue," Qureshi stressed. "Afghanistan is our friendly neighbor. We are engaged with them, as some confusions have emerged, and we shall be able to resolve them through diplomatic channels."</p> <p>A Taliban Defense Ministry spokesman on Sunday criticized the fencing project, saying Pakistan had "no right to erect barbed wire along the Durand Line and separate the tribes on both sides of the line."</p> <p>Successive governments in Afghanistan have disputed the 1893 British colonial-era demarcation. The boundary was the outcome of an agreement between Sir Mortimer Durand, a secretary of the British Indian government, and then-Afghan ruler Abdur Rahman Khan.</p> <p>Pakistan dismisses Afghan objections, saying it inherited the international border after gaining independence from Britain in 1947. But the differences over the status of the border continue to strain bilateral ties.</p> <p>The massive military-led construction effort started in 2017 to block illegal militant movement and smuggling. Pakistani officials say more than 90% of the work has been completed.</p> <p>The fencing project occasionally triggered fatal clashes between Pakistani troops and Afghan security forces of the former Western-backed government in Kabul that the Taliban ousted last August.</p>

Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/04 Highest number deadly crashes in decade
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news-brief-newsletter/wa-sees-highest-number-of-deadly-crashes-in-a-decade
GIST	<p>TRI-CITIES, Wash. — It's been a deadly year for car crashes in Washington state.</p> <p>In 2021, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) reported more fatal and serious car crashes than it's seen in a decade.</p> <p>Michael Kondratyuk from the Tri-Cities lost his sister, Angela Kondratyuk, on New Year's Eve in a deadly car crash.</p> <p>"You lose a sister, you lose family. It's like a chunk of you goes missing," Kondratyuk said.</p> <p>Washington state isn't alone; experts say it's a national trend.</p> <p>According to WSDOT, 561 fatal crashes were reported in 2021—the most the state has seen since 2012. In 2020, officials reported 535 fatal crashes and 2019 they reported 517. In 2012, 406 fatal crashes were reported.</p> <p>"A lot of the theories around it have to do with where we are as a society right now. You can see it in our statistics. We're more depressed, we're more anxious, we're more stressed and many people are feeling angry or overwhelmed and some of that I think is not just playing out on our roads, but playing out in so many aspects of society." Shelly Baldwin with the Washington Traffic Safety Commission said.</p> <p>Trooper Chris Thorson with Washington State Patrol (WSP) said in 2021 they responded to 16 fatal crashes on state highways in the Tri-Cities—the most the area has seen in six years.</p> <p>He said there were 13 fatal crashes in Yakima, 6 fatal crashes in Walla Walla and 8 fatal crashes in Grandview, reaching a grand total of 43 fatal crashes in 2021 for WSP District 3.</p> <p>"The number one reason we see fatality collisions happening here in the Tri-Cities region is people driving under the influence," Trooper Thorson said.</p> <p>He said speed also plays a huge factor.</p> <p>"They're speeding, they're following too close, they're tailgating, they're cutting other vehicles off and not yielding to the right away of other vehicles," Trooper Thorson said.</p> <p>So what's the solution?</p> <p>Baldwin said they're transitioning away from scare tactics, turning now to focus on leading by example, the key message in their "Together We Can Get There" campaign.</p> <p>"Most of us are actually good drivers and we are the ones that influence other people," Baldwin said. "You're teaching your kid to drive as soon as that car seat turns around and faces forward." A similar tactic promoted by WSP.</p> <p>"We are trying to get those positive norms out in the public, so keep doing what you're doing if you're doing the right thing," Trooper Thorson said.</p> <p>Trooper Thorson reminds drivers to buckle up and follow the basic traffic safety laws.</p>

More statistics can be found on the [WA State Crash Data Portal](#).

Below are the total number of fatal crashes reported from 2021 to 2012 according to the state's latest crash report.

2021

- 3,006 total fatal and suspected serious injury crashes
- 561 fatal crashes

2020

- 2,597 total fatal and suspected serious injury crashes
- 535 fatal crashes

2019

- 2,442 total fatal and suspected serious injury crashes
- 517 fatal crashes

2018:

- 2,417 total fatal and suspected serious injury crashes
- 489 fatal crashes

2017

- 2,448 total fatal and suspected serious injury crashes
- 532 fatal crashes

2016

- 2,400 total fatal and suspected serious injury crashes
- 506 fatal crashes

2015

- 2,250 total fatal and suspected serious injury crashes
- 497 fatal crashes

2014

- 2,114 total fatal and suspected serious injury crashes
- 430 fatal crashes

2013

- 2,011 total fatal and suspected serious injury crashes
- 408 fatal crashes

2012

- 2,278 total fatal and suspected serious injury crashes
- 406 fatal crashes

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HEADLINE	01/04 Passes highest snow total 20yrs; more still
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/passes-reach-highest-snow-total-in-20-years-more-incoming
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - The region, especially the passes, has had a lot of snow and more is coming.</p> <p>"Snoqualmie Pass has received 236" of snow, the highest total at this point in the season in 20 years," meteorologist Kristin Clark said. "The Cascades will get caked in more heavy snow, especially on Thursday, with over 30 inches forecast by the weekend."</p> <p>This could mean pass travel delays, or even closures as we have seen with routine avalanche work in the higher terrain at times.</p> <p>The lowlands won't be completely left out, with occasional snow falling. Tuesday will have scattered showers, which could bring wet snow at times.</p> <p>"A fresh 1-2 inches of snow could accumulate near the foothills as temperatures dip closer to freezing overnight," Clark said. "Elsewhere, snowfall accumulations will be of little consequence until Wednesday night, when locations north of Seattle may see a quick coating before changing to rain Thursday morning. A 1-5-inch snowfall for Bellingham, Blaine, the San Juan Islands, and Port Angeles will be the last lowland snow this week."</p>

	Thursday could bring temperatures near 50 degrees, any snow in the lowlands will likely melt. We are looking at a dry weekend with cool sunshine.
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HEADLINE	01/04 Women appearing on quarters for 2022
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/here-are-the-women-who-will-be-appearing-on-quarters-in-2022/
GIST	<p>The U.S. Mint will begin circulating quarters honoring five women this year as part of a four-year series celebrating contributions women have made to the United States. Among the diverse group of women being honored are a celebrated poet and civil rights activist, the first woman in space, the first Chinese American movie star, the first female principal chief of the Cherokee Nation and the first woman to serve as superintendent of the Santa Fe public schools.</p> <p>The women being honored were selected following an expansive selection process. Last year, the National Women's History Museum website launched a portal allowing people to submit names of women they would like to see honored. More than 11,000 names were submitted in four months.</p> <p>The recommendations served as part of the list the mint, working with other groups such as the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative, National Women's History Museum and Congressional Bipartisan Women's Caucus, considered when looking for potential honorees.</p> <p>The goal is for quarters to feature women who have made contributions in a variety of fields including suffrage, civil rights, abolition, government, humanities, science, space and the arts. The effort also aims to select women from racially, ethnically and geographically diverse backgrounds. No living woman can be selected.</p> <p>The American Women Quarters Program will continue through 2025 with the release of up to five quarters each year.</p> <p>Maya Angelou The first quarters to be sent over to the Federal Reserve this month for distribution to the public will feature writer and poet, performer and activist Maya Angelou. Angelou rose to prominence with her autobiography "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." She went on to publish more than two dozen best-selling works including poetry, fiction and nonfiction.</p> <p>In 1992, Angelou read "On the Pulse of Morning" at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, making her the first African American and woman to recite poetry at a presidential inauguration. As an activist, Angelou served as a coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Angelou also appeared in plays on and off-Broadway.</p> <p>Sally Ride Quarters featuring the first American woman in space, Sally Ride, are expected to begin circulation in February.</p> <p>In 1983, Ride was aboard the shuttle Challenger for its six-day mission in space, making her the first woman and, at 32, the youngest American in space at the time. It was the first of two flights into space aboard the shuttle for Ride, who left NASA in 1987.</p> <p>Ride went on to help educate young people, co-authoring six science books, as well as launching an organization focused on inspiring young people in STEM.</p> <p>She died of cancer in 2012.</p> <p>Wilma Mankiller</p>

Quarters featuring the first female principal chief of the Cherokee Nation and women's rights activist Wilma Mankiller will begin circulating this spring.

Mankiller founded the Community Development Department for the Cherokee Nation, which focused on improving housing and water. In 1983, she was named running mate in the re-election bid of Principal Chief Ross Swimmer. The win made her the first woman elected deputy chief of the Cherokee Nation.

She was elected chief in 1987 and left office in 1995. In 1998, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Nina Otero-Warren

Quarters with Nina Otero-Warren will be distributed this summer.

Otero-Warren was a leader in New Mexico's suffrage movement, spearheading efforts for the state to ratify the 19th Amendment recognizing women's right to vote.

During her efforts, she insisted literature be published in English and Spanish. Otero-Warren was also the first woman to serve as superintendent of the Santa Fe public schools from 1918 to 1929, where she advocated for both Spanish and English in schools, despite an English-only federal mandate. She also was a critic of the government's Indian school system, advocating for better conditions.

Anna May Wong

The final quarter as part of this year's series features Anna May Wong, considered the first Chinese American film star in Hollywood. Wong appeared in more than 60 movies, including one of the first films made in Technicolor, achieving international recognition. In 1951, she was also the first Asian American to lead a U.S. television show.

Over the next four years, the mint will continue to meet with partners to decide on potential honorees.

There are several more steps to finalize the recommendations before they are sent to the Treasury Secretary for approval.

The legislation creating the program in commemoration of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote was introduced by Congresswoman Barbara Lee of California in 2019 and passed in 2020. It was signed into law in January 2021.

While each of the five quarters this year will honor a prominent American woman, the "heads" sides of the coins will continue to feature the portrait of President George Washington.

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HEADLINE	01/03 Smuggled Iranian fuel; secret sea transfers
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iran-oil-smuggling-sanctions/2022/01/02/97a6bf90-5457-11ec-83d2-d9dab0e23b7e_story.html
GIST	<p>DUBAI — The secret transfers usually take place at night to evade detection by regional coast guards. The ships anchor in the Persian Gulf just outside the territorial limits of the United Arab Emirates, and then, individually, small boats carrying smuggled Iranian diesel shift their loads to the waiting vessels, according to seafarers who have witnessed the trade.</p> <p>“It is a big chain, with fishing boats sailing up to give diesel to a waiting tanker. It takes four to five days because boats come one by one,” said a 27-year-old Indian seafarer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. He said he had been employed by a Dubai-based shipping company that smuggled Iranian fuel to Somalia.</p> <p>His description of these illicit operations, which accelerated when the United States reimposed sanctions on Iranian oil exports after President Donald Trump withdrew from the Iranian nuclear deal in 2018, is one</p>

of five eyewitness accounts provided by Indian nationals who say they worked on vessels involved in the clandestine commerce. While smuggling of Iranian petroleum products has been documented previously and drawn a U.S. rebuke, these seafarers offered a rare inside look at how these activities are carried out.

The tankers always anchor in the international waters that separate Iran and the UAE, recounted a 28-year-old Indian seafarer, who said he worked for two companies involved in smuggling Iranian diesel between 2016 and 2020.

“UAE territorial waters end after 12 miles, so Iranian ships come as close as 14 to 20 miles to the UAE,” he said. “They switch off their AIS [automatic identification system] so that they can’t be tracked. If they see the UAE coast guard, they stop the operation and run away.”

In addition to the nighttime transfers at sea, Iranian diesel bound for international markets is exported on tankers setting sail from Iran with the origin of the shipment forged to make it look as though it came from Iraq or the UAE, according to a third seafarer and three experts in security and energy affairs.

Because of the profit margins, this trade was highly lucrative even before the United States pulled out of the nuclear deal. Iran has some of the world’s cheapest fuel prices thanks to very low production costs, heavy government subsidies and a weak currency. But the reimposed economic sanctions have given this business a further boost as smugglers seek to evade restrictions on Iranian oil exports. Those sanctions are now a focus of discussions in Vienna, where Iran and world powers have resumed negotiations aimed at reviving the nuclear accord.

“The transport of sanctioned Iranian [petroleum] products happens on a weekly basis,” said Cormac McGarry, associate director of Control Risks, a consultancy. “There are financial drivers and the demand, so Iran will find a way around sanctions. And its policy is to keep that an absolute secret. They don’t reveal how they do it.”

The smuggling involves elements of the Iranian state, notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and private shipping companies based in Persian Gulf countries, according to analysts specializing in the energy industry and regional security. At times, they said, the IRGC seeks to interdict those who try to secure a piece of its action without the group’s permission.

The U.S. Treasury Department [has accused the IRGC](#) of making money from the smuggling of oil and petroleum products.

Iranian officials have previously said they oppose diesel smuggling. The Iranian Foreign Ministry did not reply to a request for comment.

“The maritime component of the IRGC has a very rigid control over the maritime border as well as the port facilities. A lot of people are being paid off. The IRGC is a highly corrupt institution,” said Andreas Krieg, a senior lecturer at the School of Security Studies at King’s College London. “If we look at the quantities that are being smuggled each year from Iran, we’re talking millions of barrels.”

A 'scary' shipboard raid

Deepak Verma’s hands were tied at gunpoint. He was ordered to stay still. Six armed men in uniforms had rushed onto his ship, the MV Asphalt Princess, he recalled, and they identified themselves as members of the Iranian military.

Their leader warned, ‘ “If anybody speaks or tries to do something, we will kill him.’ We sat on the floor with our hands behind our backs,” said Verma, 32, who held the position of second engineer on the ship. “He asked if diesel was onboard. But nobody said a word.”

A few hours earlier on that day in August, a small boat from Iran had sailed up to the Asphalt Princess and transferred diesel into its storage tank, Verma said, so the fuel could be sold on to other vessels for shipment abroad.

The assailants ordered the crew to sail the ship to Iran, but the crew — about a dozen men from India and Sri Lanka — stalled by claiming the engine was having problems and could catch fire. Then, in the early hours of the following morning, the attackers left suddenly for reasons that remain unclear.

“That time was so scary,” Verma said.

United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) issued a warning notice in the hours after the attack that the incident was a potential hijacking.

Suspicion quickly fell on Iranian forces, and specifically the IRGC. According to Krieg, the IRGC detains or hijacks vessels when shipping companies seek to smuggle petroleum products without its permission.

“When you have the IRGC seizing ships, this indicates they are without the approval from the higher echelons, who also want to make money out of it,” Krieg added. “It’s also good in terms of international reputation, because there are allegations that the Iranians are actively helping smugglers to circumvent the sanctions.”

Three seafarers other than Verma said that Prime Tankers, the Dubai-based company that owns the Asphalt Princess, is involved in shipping Iranian diesel on at least two other ships as well. In 2019, the IRGC detained the MT Riah, another ship in Prime Tankers’ fleet, [on accusations of smuggling](#).

Cargo documents for the Asphalt Princess obtained by The Washington Post show that during 2021 the ship has also transported refined oil products, bitumen and rubber process oil — which are covered by U.S. sanctions — from Iran to Oman and China.

Prime Tankers did not respond to a request for comment.

Obfuscation and bribes

Vikash Thakur, an Indian seafarer with a decade of experience, said it can be dangerous to disclose what he’s seen in the Persian Gulf. “Seafarers don’t want to talk about these things. They are afraid,” he said.

But it’s hard to miss this shadow commerce. The sea lanes between the Strait of Hormuz and ports in Dubai and Saudi Arabia are busy with small boats carrying contraband diesel for transfer to larger vessels, Thakur said. At times, he said, the diesel is temporarily stored in the Emirati port of Sharjah, where documents are forged to make it seem as if the fuel came from Iraq. (The Sharjah Ports Authority did not respond to a request for comment.)

“It’s an open secret that illicit trade goes on, but nobody actually names it,” said Andy Bowman, regional director for the Middle East and South Asia at the Mission to Seafarers charity. “The waters from Ajman [in the UAE] to Iran, particularly at night, are busy with ships moving at unusual times and not coming into port, but discharging or connecting with other ships while they’re anchored.”

From there, cargoes of refined products, such as diesel, are transported onward to countries such as Yemen and Somalia, said Samir Madani, co-founder of TankerTrackers.com, a consultancy that tracks shipments of crude oil.

“The classic way to obfuscate is to switch off your [AIS] transponder, then you go dark for a week, then you come back online, and everyone is wondering where you picked your cargo up from,” Madani said.

Mc Garry, of Control Risks, said turning off the AIS violates international maritime codes and is a red flag for illicit activity. “Because of these gaps in AIS, it is difficult to spot where those ships have met up. Then we start losing the track of where that cargo goes to because it gets transferred to another ship,” he said.

	<p>This lack of transparency poses a risk to potential purchasers, Mc Garry said, because they could be involved in the trade of diesel and crude oil that looks “perfectly legitimate” but falls under U.S. sanctions, leaving these businesses exposed to potential fines.</p> <p>For the seafarers, this can be a perilous business. Both the IRGC and pirates pose a menace, and ships often carry large sums of money in case either one needs to be paid off. Indrajeet Rathod, 30, who worked on a ship smuggling diesel to Yemen from 2017 through 2020, said his vessel carried about \$10,000 for bribes. Thakur said the captain of his ship usually had \$50,000.</p> <p>“The only way to get the Iranians to leave the ship is for the captain to give them cash,” Thakur said. He added, “Cash can save the seafarers from torture. Because they [the IRGC] never behave like humans. They start beating, always.”</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/04 Auburn police: 3 dead in home
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/3-killed-auburn-shooting/CANV6OMONRFI5GVHO3D5FAGVYE/
GIST	<p>AUBURN, Wash. — A major investigation is underway in Auburn on Tuesday, as police responded to a call of shots fired near the 2100 block of 66th Street Southeast.</p> <p>Once officers went inside the home, they found the bodies of a man, woman and child inside.</p> <p>Neighbors say the deceased are a mother, father and son.</p> <p>“It’s the new year too, I don’t know why anybody would do this,” asks Carmen Barlianto who lives nearby.</p> <p>Auburn Police say it was just before 7 p.m. Tuesday when the call came in.</p> <p>“The person who called 9-1-1 was a child who was also in the house and they were able to get out and call 9-1-1,” says Kolby Trossley with the Auburn Police Department.</p> <p>Barlianto and others neighbors say that child is the couple’s daughter.</p> <p>“It’s a tragedy for the family and I don’t know what’s going to happen to her,” says Barlianto.</p> <p>Police tape and cop cars lined the road for hours, as neighbors looked on</p> <p>“The neighbors, we all get together and hangout together, watch football together,” says Alfredo Roque. “It’s kind of shocking that this happens right down the street.”</p> <p>As investigators start to piece the case together, many are now wondering what happened at the home and what the future holds for the couple’s daughter.</p> <p>“I’m praying for that family,” says neighbor Abdul Jama. “My prayers and my thoughts are with them so we will see what’s going on.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Minors get lawyer before police interviews
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/new-law-in-effect-requires-juveniles-have-access-to-attorney-before-police-interrogations

GIST	<p>YAKIMA -- A new law now in effect in Washington makes it so juveniles must first be given access to an attorney before being questioned by police.</p> <p>This could have a profound impact in Yakima, where many teens and young juveniles have been suspects in shootings and murders.</p> <p>Local law enforcement have expressed frustration saying the new law may make it much more difficult to solve and prosecute cases, including ones related to gang violence.</p> <p>Yakima County prosecutor Joe Brusic says when those kids talk with an attorney, that attorney will almost certainly tell the juvenile not to talk with police.</p> <p>Before the new year, juveniles were treated similarly to adults when brought into custody - they were read their rights and they themselves would decide if they want to make a statement or give a confession to officers.</p> <p>"I think this is most definitely going to affect our ability to investigate and prosecute some of these juveniles that otherwise would have made a statement after miranda was read," says Brusic. "I think it's going to affect the evidence that we gather. I think it's going to affect our ability going forward on some of these cases."</p> <p>Officers are also now required to record all questioning they have with children. Brusic says this has already been common practice locally.</p> <p>But he says, if a juvenile were to confess to having committed a crime, and that confession was not recorded, it would most likely be considered inadmissible.</p> <p>Those who pushed for the measure say House Bill 1140 better protects teens' constitutional rights, who may be more likely to waive their rights if intimidated by police.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Manhattan DA downgrades felony crimes
SOURCE	https://nypost.com/2022/01/04/manhattan-da-alvin-bragg-to-stop-seeking-prison-in-some-cases/
GIST	<p>Who needs soft-on-crime judges when the district attorney doesn't even want to lock up the bad guys?</p> <p>Manhattan's new DA has ordered his prosecutors to stop seeking prison sentences for hordes of criminals and to downgrade felony charges in cases including armed robberies and drug dealing, according to a set of progressive policies made public Tuesday.</p> <p>In his first memo to staff on Monday, Alvin Bragg said his office "will not seek a carceral sentence" except with homicides and a handful of other cases, including domestic violence felonies, some sex crimes and public corruption.</p> <p>"This rule may be excepted only in extraordinary circumstances based on a holistic analysis of the facts, criminal history, victim's input (particularly in cases of violence or trauma), and any other information available," the memo reads.</p> <p>Assistant district attorneys must also now keep in mind the "impacts of incarceration," including whether it really does increase public safety, potential future barriers to convicts involving housing and employment, the financial cost of prison and the racial disparities over who gets time, Bragg instructed.</p> <p>In cases where prosecutors do seek to put a convict behind bars, the request can be for no more than 20 years for a determinate sentence, meaning one that can't be reviewed or changed by a parole board.</p> <p>"The Office shall not seek a sentence of life without parole," the memo states.</p>

Under state law, that punishment is reserved for the most heinous of murderers, including terrorists, serial killers, cop killers and fiends who kill children younger than 14 during in connection with sex crimes or torture.

Bragg's memo also detailed the following instructions for prosecutors to reduce charges filed by cops in various cases:

- Armed robbers who use guns or other deadly weapons to stick up stores and other businesses will be prosecuted only for petty larceny, a misdemeanor, provided no victims were seriously injured and there's no "genuine risk of physical harm" to anyone. Armed robbery, a class B felony, would typically be punishable by a maximum of 25 years in prison, while petty larceny subjects offenders to up to 364 days in jail and a \$1,000 fine.
- Convicted criminals caught with weapons other than guns will have those felony charges downgraded to misdemeanors unless they're also charged with more serious offenses. Criminal possession of a weapon in the third degree, a class D felony, is punishable by up to 7 years behind bars.
- Burglars who steal from residential storage areas, parts of homes that aren't "accessible to a living area" and businesses located in mixed-use buildings will be prosecuted for a low-level class D felony that only covers break-ins instead of for more serious crimes. Those more serious crimes, class B and class C felonies, would be punishable by up to 25 and up to 15 years in prison respectively.
- Drug dealers believed to be "acting as a low-level agent of a seller" will be prosecuted only for misdemeanor possession. Also, suspected dealers will only be prosecuted on felony charges if they're also accused of more serious crimes or are actually caught in the act of selling drugs. That felony would mean facing up to seven years behind bars.

"ADAs should use their judgment and experience to evaluate the person arrested, and identify people: who suffer from mental illness; who are unhoused; who commit crimes of poverty; or who suffer from substance use disorders," Bragg added.

"Charges should be brought consistent with the goal of providing services to such individuals, and leverage during plea negotiations should not be a factor in this decision," he wrote.

In an accompanying "Day One" letter to his staff, Bragg claimed, "These policy changes not only will, in and of themselves, make us safer; they also will free up prosecutorial resources to focus on violent crime."

He also pledged that "new initiatives and policies on guns, sex crimes, hate crimes, and other matters will be announced in the coming weeks."

The moves sparked immediate outrage from cops who said the policies will lead to more crime and shootings.

"Bragg gives criminals the roadmap to freedom from prosecution and control of our streets," said the head of the NYPD Detectives' Endowment Association.

"In Bragg's Manhattan, you can resist arrest, deal drugs, obstruct arrests, and even carry a gun and get away with it," DEA president Paul DiGiacomo said in a prepared statement.

The head of the NYPD's largest union, the Police Benevolent Association, also expressed "serious concerns about the message these types of policies send to both police officers and criminals on the street."

"Police officers don't want to be sent out to enforce laws that the district attorneys won't prosecute," PBA president Patrick Lynch said.

"And there are already too many people who believe that they can commit crimes, resist arrest, interfere with police officers and face zero consequences."

A Manhattan police supervisor said: “The identical platform has not worked out in San Francisco, Chicago, Philadelphia and Baltimore.”

“It will lead to more young lives lost to gang violence and innocent people being hurt both physically and emotionally,” the high-ranking cop said.

Another Manhattan cop fumed, “This is outrageous. He was elected to enforce the law. If he wanted to change them, he should have run for a state office.”

During a news conference Tuesday to announce the indictments of 17 members of three gangs in Brooklyn, Mayor Eric Adams was asked for his reaction.

“I have not communicated with the DA. I have not looked over and analyzed exactly what he’s calling for,” he said.

But Adams, a former NYPD captain who was elected on a law-and-order platform, added: “I have a lot of respect for DA Bragg, a former prosecutor. He has a real vision.”

Adams also said he planned to meet soon with state and federal lawmakers “to get in the room and operate off the same playbook.”

“We can have the justice we deserve with the public safety we need,” he said.

“And I believe DA Bragg will be open to engage in that conversation, as well as the DAs in Staten Island as well as the Bronx.”

In July, [Adams appeared alongside Bragg](#) at the Rev. Al Sharpton’s National Action Network headquarters in Harlem after both men won their Democratic Party primary races.

At the time, Adams said Bragg’s views on addressing crime were “no different than mine,” adding: “Alvin Bragg is going to redefine the prosecutor’s office and how we are going to ensure that we don’t criminalize young people every day in this city.”

Bragg, who was sworn into office Jan. 1, also made clear his mission is to reduce the number of defendants locked up pretrial, telling his prosecutors, “Particularly given the ongoing crisis at Rikers, we must reserve pretrial detention for very serious cases.”

The 48-year-old also vowed to stop pursuing many low-level offenses in his note to staff, titled: “Achieving Fairness and Safety.”

A civil rights lawyer and former federal prosecutor, he drew on his own experiences growing up in the 1980s in Harlem in his note to staff — and [during the campaign](#) — saying it has influenced his belief in reforming the criminal justice system.

“Data, and my personal experiences, show that reserving incarceration for matters involving significant harm will make us safer,” the memo reads.

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HEADLINE	01/04 KCPAO: fewer prosecution juvenile felonies
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3296228/rantz-prosecutor-says-get-used-to-no-jail-time-for-teen-crimes/
GIST	A top King County prosecutor told a group of South Sound law enforcement officials that they better “get used to” no jail time for juvenile criminals responsible for the alarming rise of violence in the region. He even joked about their concern, using a popular meme that some on the call found offensive.

Ben Carr is the senior deputy prosecuting attorney for King County. He offered a PowerPoint presentation on how the county treats juvenile offenders driving much of the crime. The meeting was called after mayors criticized the prosecutor's office for going too easy on criminals, demanding answers. It did not go well.

Local officials didn't hear any promise to prosecute criminal suspects. In fact, they were told that the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office (KCPAO) will not prosecute nearly half of juvenile felonies, even when they bring guns to school or commit assault, motor vehicle theft, or residential burglary.

Instead, violent criminals will be enrolled in restorative justice programs run by police and prison abolitionists.

'Get used to' light on crime approach

The Jason Rantz Show on KTTH [obtained a copy of the presentation](#) offered to law enforcement officials from South Sound cities experiencing a surge in violent crime. The Zoom presentation itself was not recorded.

Carr said his office doesn't plan on prosecuting many juvenile cases. Citing the Juvenile Justice Act of 1977, which mentions the importance of rehabilitation, the office prefers diversion — even for violent felonies.

The eighth slide on this topic angered some leaders on and off the call. It's titled "rehabilitation," and states that "even for serious offenses, the focus will be primarily on rehabilitation (get used to this concept)."

Given that the office's inaction on prosecutions is perceived as driving the violence, telling them to "get used to" it didn't land.

"It was shocking to me," Kent Mayor Dana Ralph, who was not on the call but was given a meeting recap, told the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH. "That we should 'get used to it?' It was shocking to me."

'This is fine' meme ruffles feathers

Also offending some on and off the call was the opening slide.

Carr featured the popular "This is fine" [meme](#), showing a dog drinking coffee in a building that's on fire. It's meant ironically. But some on the call explained that it mocked their valid concerns over several high-profile shootings and murders.

The presentation went so poorly, Carr had to explain the perceived slight to Jimmy Hung, the chief deputy prosecutor in the juvenile division. Hung heard of the complaints, though tells the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH that the context of the slide is important to understand. Carr, he says, wasn't being flippant.

Carr sent over what he called "the offending PowerPoint" to Hung in an email obtained by the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH.

Carr explained the context.

"Obviously, 'This is fine' was used to make two points: 1) that significant system change is happening around us right now, and 2) that a large portion of the changes are overdue, being done to address racial disproportionality and over-incarceration, and that we should take a moment — in all sincerity, not just ironically — to consider that these changes may actually be 'fine.'"

But the changes aren't "fine" to local lawmakers, police departments, and community members who are witnessing their city's murder rates soar.

“Needless to say, future meetings will focus less on collegiality and more on data,” Carr told Hung via email.

Significantly fewer prosecutions

Over the next several slides, Carr offered an example of a case that wouldn’t land a suspect in jail: bringing a gun to school.

It caught the attention of Federal Way officials. The city experienced six instances where guns were confiscated at schools in the district last year.

The slide reads: “Young Timmy brings a pistol to school, brandishes it during a confrontation, and causes panic.”

Carr went through different considerations ahead of making a charging decision: Does the juvenile division have jurisdiction? Was a crime committed? What will happen to the juvenile and the case if it goes through the juvenile division?

The prosecutor then discussed different laws that could apply, explaining how the KCPAO would make a charging decision. Ultimately, however, he told participants that “most likely, no time in custody and no ultimate conviction.” He cited RCW 13.40.070, which he says compels the office to pursue diversion programs.

Restorative justice

Carr then pivoted to the newly-implemented Restorative Community Pathways (RCP). This is a new “restorative justice” program that provides alternatives to jail time. The KCPAO will forward 40% of juvenile criminals to this program, with plans to send a higher percentage in the coming years.

This program was announced in November 2020, and backed by the King County Council. It is not funded via KCPAO.

The alternatives are offered to certain felony suspects. Rather than going in front of a judge, RCP puts the suspects in front of a community panel of activists. That panel decides how the suspect can be held accountable.

But the activists likely making the decision have poor track records and far-left political beliefs, which include abolishing the police and jails.

What is RCP, really?

Carr notes in the slides that RCP will not be run by the community groups that originally proposed the idea to the prosecutor’s office.

“RCP was initially proposed by Collective Justice, Creative Justice, CHOOSE 180, and Community Passageways,” a slide notes.

He then assured those on the call that: “Although the organizations submitted the initial proposal, they are NOT RCP.” Carr promises that the RCP “will be designed by and with impacted communities.”

But RCP is, in fact, run by those very groups. The slide’s language, which Carr did not write, was old. He included the old data unintentionally.

Those groups are already responsible for releasing dangerous, violent juvenile criminals and failing to get them on the right path. Now, they’re given more responsibility, bigger budgets, and more legitimacy. Extremists are behind RCP

RCP [explains](#) its “end goal is ABOLITION,” and that they are “fighting to dismantle the carceral state.”

They've successfully fought to kill the Children and Family Justice Center project, which would have been used to house juvenile criminals. After their tactics, which included "disrupting Executive Dow Constantine's events," "home demonstrations in front of council member houses," and "shutting down the King County council chambers," they got their way. The project was abandoned, though not before Antifa terrorists burned down a portion of the construction site during a violent demonstration.

The groups behind RCP are not merely talking about abolishing prison sentences for juveniles. Some of the activists from the groups involved are police abolitionists.

Nikkita Oliver, a failed mayoral and council candidate, is behind one of the organizations involved. The political extremist is a virulently anti-cop, police abolitionist who proposed a 100% defunding of the Seattle Police Department.

Oliver helped release a violent suspect who was engaged in the very kind of restorative justice program the KCPAO claims provides "evidence-based" solutions.

But neither RCP nor the community organizations involved successfully curbed violent crime because they keep violent offenders out of jail.

The case of Jakwaun Shannon

Oliver advocated to keep 16-year-old Jakwaun Shannon out of jail, despite his violent criminal record. To Oliver, no youth belongs in jail.

In 2019, when Shannon was 14 years old, police connected him and a friend to four armed robberies, three drive-by shootings, and a pistol-whipping. The two were arrested after a high-speed chase in which Shannon was allegedly the driver.

He was offered probation instead of juvenile detention. He worked with Oliver's Creative Justice group, which offers art therapy. Despite that work, Shannon ended up arrested and charged for an armed attempted robbery and a carjacking.

According to police documents, two female victims were shot, one losing her kidney and a portion of her intestines as a result. Pictures taken at the time of his arrest show Shannon was wearing a "No New Youth Jail" T-shirt at the time.

This is the evidence-based system that the KCPAO and Carr support. But they should know better. Carr was the prosecuting attorney assigned to the first Shannon case.

Mayors fight back but are ignored

The mayors of Federal Way, Renton, Kent, and Auburn [asked](#) the KCPAO to pause RCP.

City leaders, with the possible exception of Seattle, were not part of the process to create RCP. They were shocked to learn the violent charges that would be eligible for the program.

But the KCPAO is refusing to pause the program or address their concerns.

"Instead of trying to meet the cities halfway, the King County prosecutor's office is running in the opposite direction. It's an outrageous breach of public trust," [said](#) Federal Way Mayor Jim Ferrell.

Mayor Ralph says the KCPAO has agreed to more meetings, at least. She says she'll remain "cautiously optimistic."

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Click [here](#) to see the full PowerPoint presentation.

HEADLINE	01/04 Fla. airports: record guns at checkpoints
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SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/transportation/florida-airports-break-records-for-guns-at-checkpoints/
GIST	<p>Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers across the State of Florida have seen a surge in passengers bringing guns to airport checkpoints, breaking records across the state and specifically at the international airports in Ft. Lauderdale, Tampa, Miami, Pensacola, Fort Myers, and Destin-Fort Walton Beach.</p> <p>TSA officers stopped guns on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, the day after Christmas and throughout the year. TSA spokesperson Sari Koshetz said the troubling and record-breaking trend is dangerous and threatens the safety of passengers and officers.</p> <p>Across the state 658 passengers have brought guns to the checkpoints, the highest number ever.</p> <p>TSA is reminding every passenger to pay more attention to where their guns are before leaving home and entering an airport. If you are traveling with your gun, it must be in checked baggage and you must check what the laws are on the other side of your trip.</p> <p>Year to date, TSA officers have stopped 130 guns at Ft. Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL); the previous record was 100 in 2019. At MIA it is now 80 year-to-date, with the previous record of 60 reached last year. TSA officers at Tampa International Airport (TPA) have intercepted 105 guns this year with the previous record of 97 in 2017. At Pensacola International Airport TSA officers have intercepted 36 guns compared to the highest previous number of 30 in 2019. At Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers the TSA has stopped 38 passengers with guns this year compared to the previous record of 28 in 2017. At Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport the TSA has stopped 12 guns compared to the highest number of 10 in 2018. The total at Orlando International (MCO) is now 120, approaching the previous record of 123 in 2018.</p> <p>Passengers face a civil penalty from the TSA that can reach as much as \$13,910 and that is imposed regardless of whether the individual is cited or physically arrested and transported to jail by our law enforcement partners. If the traveler is in the TSA PreCheck® program, those privileges will be lost for a period of time. And repeat offenders may lose their privileges permanently.</p> <p>FLL, TPA and MCO are typically in the top 10 or 11 airports across the country for passengers violating the federal law.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Lawsuit: acquitted after being jailed 9rs
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/jailed-for-9-years-man-acquitted-of-2008-slaying-sues-king-county-redmond-for-malicious-prosecution/
GIST	<p>At one time, Emanuel Fair was the longest-serving inmate in the King County Jail, spending nine years behind bars without being convicted of a crime.</p> <p>All the while, Fair, whose family was unable to foot his seven-figure bail, said he had faith he would one day walk away free from a charge alleging he murdered Arpana Jinaga, 24, in her Redmond apartment after a Halloween party in 2008.</p> <p>“I always knew I was going to get out; I just didn’t think it would take as long as it took,” Fair, 38, said last month.</p> <p>After the jury in his first trial deadlocked in 2017, King County prosecutors tried Fair again in 2019. At his second trial, a jury found him not guilty.</p> <p>Now, more than two years later, Fair is suing King County, the city of Redmond and Redmond Police Capt. Brian Coats, who led the investigation into Jinaga’s murder as a detective 13 years ago.</p>

Fair's 23-page complaint, filed last month by his attorney, Ryan Dreveskracht, contends police and prosecutors botched the probe and wrongly targeted him because he was a Black man with a criminal record, despite evidence implicating Jinaga's then-neighbor, who is white.

After zeroing in on Fair because of his race and rap sheet, investigators relied on cherry-picked DNA evidence while disregarding other genetic findings and suspects as part of a "gather facts that fit the theory strategy," the suit alleges. The result, it claims, was a biased probe that "caused Fair to be arrested and charged without probable cause for a murder he did not commit."

Then, due to "inexcusable delays in Fair's trial and prolonged pretrial detention," he "spent more than nine years in the King County Correctional Facility as an innocent man, in conditions of inhumane confinement that are well known to have a detrimental effect on mental health," the suit contends.

"I felt like I was kidnapped," Fair said in last month's interview, when explaining his decision to pursue his claims of negligence, civil rights violations and malicious prosecution. "I lost a lot. There was potential there that was just taken away."

Citing pending litigation, a city of Redmond spokesperson declined to comment about Fair's lawsuit on behalf of Coats and the city's Police Department. A spokesperson for the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office said in an email, "we look forward to addressing these allegations in a public courtroom, and we are confident in our case."

The prosecutor's office also provided an uncut hourlong recording of an interview of former Chief Deputy Criminal Prosecuting Attorney Erin Ehlert in 2020 for a [true crime podcast called "Suspect."](#) which examined the case. In it, Ehlert stood firmly by the prosecuting team's decisions.

"In my opinion, and in my heart, I don't have any question about anything we did in regards to charging — that Emanuel Fair killed Arpana Jinaga," she said.

Ehlert also defended an immunity deal with the suspected neighbor, and the decision to solely prosecute Fair for first-degree murder with sexual motivation — a charge that hinged mostly on trace DNA collected from a crime scene teeming with genetic evidence linked to multiple people.

"I fear and I worry that someone else may become a victim at some point in time," Ehlert said of Fair's acquittal during the 2020 interview. "And that's hard."

Such remarks since his exoneration only demonstrate authorities' defensiveness about mishandling the case, Fair said.

"They messed up," he said. "So what else can they do but to continue to point their finger at me?"

A lead suspect

On Oct. 31, 2008, Fair took a bus to Redmond to stay the weekend with a friend at the Valley View Apartments. Jinaga and other tenants he hadn't met were co-hosting a large Halloween party in several units.

Jinaga, an outgoing Rutgers University grad, had moved to Redmond six months earlier to work as a software engineer at a Bellevue firm. She had opened her third-floor apartment to Fair and dozens of other partygoers, who traipsed in and out during the festivities.

After the party wound down, Jinaga was seen returning to her apartment about 3 a.m.; investigators believe she was killed at about 8 a.m. Nov. 1.

Two days later, after Jinaga hadn't shown up to work or returned calls to her family in India, a family friend and Jinaga's next-door neighbor found her door kicked in and her nude body on her bedroom floor. She'd been gagged, beaten and strangled during an apparent sexual attack.

To contaminate evidence, Jinaga's hands had been doused in blue toilet-bowl cleaner and her body covered in motor oil. Her arm and a blanket also were partially burned and her comforter was soaking in a bathtub.

Fair's lawsuit includes many of the same facts that his public defender, Ben Goldsmith, used to poke holes in the prosecution's criminal case. It contends Fair was asleep at his friend's apartment when Jinaga likely was attacked, and that he didn't attempt to leave the area: He helped clean up outdoor areas after the party and stayed with his friend at her apartment for two more days.

It also points out that Jinaga's neighbor "quickly emerged as the lead suspect in the case as inconsistencies in his story began to surface."

The neighbor initially neglected to tell detectives about phone calls he made to Jinaga at 3 a.m. Later on the morning of her slaying, he drove to the Canadian border and attempted to cross it without a passport but was denied entry.

Coats and another Redmond detective confronted the neighbor about his calls to Jinaga, but then released him and returned his phone without examining it. The neighbor, who later hired a lawyer and stopped cooperating, "subsequently scrubbed his phone of call and text data," the suit states.

Investigators focused on Fair after seeing him in photos of the party. Fair's lawsuit cites a comment Coats made during his interview for the "Suspect" podcast — that Fair was "the only African American at the party" in the photos.

After a background check revealed Fair's criminal record, including a third-degree child rape conviction, Fair "quickly became the new prime suspect" despite leads about the neighbor and other viable suspects, the suit states.

Fair ultimately was charged based on trace DNA evidence found on Jinaga's neck; a piece of duct tape used to gag her; paper found in the apartment; and mixed with Jinaga's blood on a robe recovered from the apartment building's dumpster.

"It was the combination of the various items that his DNA was on that pushed us to the point of saying we are convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that Emanuel Fair killed Arpana," Ehlert said in her podcast interview.

Fair's lawsuit contends the probable cause affidavit used to support the murder charge omitted multiple facts, including that several other men's DNA also was found on crime scene evidence and items found in the dumpster. DNA from the neighbor was found on a motor oil bottle, and from another man who wasn't at the party on a bootlace likely used to strangle Jinaga.

Ehlert, in the 2020 interview, noted prosecutors were barred from including some key evidence at trial: Fair's past convictions and the possibility that he and the neighbor acted together in Jinaga's killing because there wasn't evidence to support that theory — a decision upheld by the state Court of Appeals after Fair's first trial.

During the trials, the neighbor, whom prosecutors at one point granted immunity for information, invoked his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination.

"I think he may have been involved; I think he may have lied to us," Ehlert said of the neighbor. "I don't think he killed Arpana. He went on afterwards, he got his degree, he's never had a crime."

Fair, who had only met the neighbor at the party that night, said prosecutors' immunity deal was just another biased action taken to strengthen the case against him that backfired, because the neighbor "didn't even implicate me, he implicated himself."

	<p>After-the-fact contentions about inadmissible evidence are “a little disingenuous,” said Dreveskracht, Fair’s attorney, who noted police at one point consulted with a psychic medium who attempted to contact Jinaga beyond the grave.</p> <p>“If you have probable cause, you don’t go to a psychic,” he said.</p> <p>“Away for so long”</p> <p>Most of Fair’s jail term was spent away from the general population in “administrative segregation” — essentially, solitary confinement. To pass time, he said he read books, wrote letters and drew pictures. He also successfully represented himself in a legal claim for an injury he sustained from handcuffs, receiving a \$25,000 settlement from King County in 2017.</p> <p>Since his release two-and-a-half years ago, Fair said he’s struggled to adjust to life outside of jail or find steady work. Now working a security job and living with friends in Renton, he said he’s often depressed, carries guilt for a younger brother’s emotional troubles and avoids going out.</p> <p>On Thanksgiving, when he hadn’t shown up to his family’s dinner, Fair said an aunt called him to ask whether he was planning to come.</p> <p>“I didn’t know how to answer, so I just told her the truth: I’m depressed. I just don’t want to be around nobody,” he said.</p> <p>“I’ve been away for so long, I don’t believe in holidays no more,” he said. “When you’re in jail, you don’t have a holiday. It’s just another day. So it’s kind of messed up. Those are times when you should be around family. But I don’t have a desire to do that. I just want to be myself.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Pierce Co. court suspends jury trials: Covid
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article257049617.html
GIST	<p>Pierce County Superior Court on Tuesday suspended all new civil and criminal jury trials for at least two and a half weeks, pointing to a need to keep staff and court participants safe while COVID-19 case numbers from the Omicron variant climb.</p> <p>Jury trials are suspended until at least Jan. 21, with new trials slated to begin again Jan. 24. The suspension does not affect bench trials or other in-court appearances, according to a news release.</p> <p>“We just don’t know what the numbers are going to come out after the Christmas and New Year’s break,” Superior Court administrator Chris Gaddis said in a brief phone call.</p> <p>Gaddis said there is one jury trial underway at Superior Court that will continue until completed. He said he expects it to wrap up next week.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Man freed 37yrs after witness lied
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/01/04/man-freed-37-years-philadelphia-murder/
GIST	<p>A Philadelphia man walked out of prison on Monday, 37 years after he was convicted of murdering a woman, an accusation he has vehemently denied, and after a federal court found prosecutors suppressed evidence of false testimony given by a key witness, the Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office said.</p> <p>Willie Stokes’s release comes after the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania vacated his murder conviction last week, concluding that the state violated Stokes’s constitutional rights by “withholding” crucial evidence about the false testimony of a key witness in the case, according to court documents.</p>

The court ordered Stokes to be retried within 120 days or released, and the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office acknowledged that the suppressed evidence crumbled the legal basis of the prosecution and "fatally undermined confidence" in Stokes's conviction.

Stokes is expected to appear in court Jan. 27, when the district attorney's office will probably inform its final decision to dismiss the matter or retry him, his lawyer Michael Diamondstein said in an interview Monday.

"He took his first free breaths this afternoon after almost 40 years, and he is very happy and humbled," Diamondstein said, and added that Stokes's first wish after being released was to go "get a corned beef hoagie."

Kevin Strickland exonerated after 43 years in one of the longest wrongful-conviction cases in U.S. history

On Monday, Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner acknowledged that Stokes's "remarkable" case was part of police and prosecutorial malpractices that were pervasive "during the so-called tough-on-crime 1980s and 1990s, and unfortunately persist in far too many jurisdictions today," he said in a news release.

"Prosecutors have an obligation to seek justice, and to redefine prosecutorial success — not by 'wins' in the form of convictions, but by accuracy and fairness in resolving criminal investigations and prosecutions," the statement added.

Krasner noted that Stokes's legal ordeal of nearly four decades — during which he filed numerous relief petitions and appeals to overturn his conviction, only to be rejected on procedural basis — underscored "the urgency of the criminal legal system seeking justice over finality."

It was not until late November that the U.S. District Court in Pennsylvania agreed to hold a hearing. After reviewing the evidence, Judge Carol Sandra Moore Wells concluded that for 37 years prosecutors did not disclose to Stokes and his defense lawyers that Franklin Lee, the key witness who had accused him of murder, admitted that his testimony was a lie and that he had been convicted of perjury for it, and therefore Stokes was entitled to relief.

In 1984, Lee was in prison facing murder and rape charges when he was approached by two homicide detectives who offered him "sex, drugs, and a deal," in exchange for framing Stokes, according to his testimony in November.

"They said I wouldn't do no more than two to five, the most seven years," he said.

Lee added that to help persuade him to testify against Stokes, the detectives allowed his girlfriend to meet with him in private at police headquarters. Another time, he said, the detectives provided condoms and a sex worker, he said.

The two detectives, Lawrence Gerrard and Ernest Gilbert, have faced allegations of using similar "coercive methods" to obtain false testimonies from witnesses in other cases, court documents show.

According to the Philadelphia Inquirer, the allegations first emerged more than 30 years ago, when a federal judge overturned the conviction of Arthur Lester, who said Gilbert and Gerrard used those tactics to coerce his confession. At least five other men are still in prison on convictions tainted by similar claims, the local newspaper reported.

During Stokes's preliminary hearing in 1984, Lee claimed that Stokes was at his "house drinking, smoking, gambling," and that in his basement, he admitted to killing Leslie Campbell in North Philadelphia, according to court documents.

There was no other evidence linking Stokes directly to the crime. A second surviving victim of the shooting attack testified that Stokes was not the shooter. Only one eyewitness said he saw Stokes at the scene holding a gun — but not shooting.

But during Stokes's murder trial, Lee surprisingly recanted his testimony — which prosecutors argued was not credible given his own criminal history.

Nevertheless, on Aug. 21, 1984, a jury convicted Stokes of first-degree murder and possession of an instrument of crime and sentenced him to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Soon after, they also charged Lee for perjury for his false hearing testimony. But that information was never disclosed to Stokes — who could have used it for his defense and appeals litigation.

It took decades for Stokes to discover that the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office had prosecuted Lee for falsely accusing him.

During the November hearing, Lee, 62, testified that his initial statement given to police and at the preliminary hearing implicating Stokes in Campbell's murder was false.

"Mr. Lee, did Willie Stokes ever tell you that he killed Leslie Campbell?" Diamondstein, Stokes's attorney, asked Lee at the November hearing.

"No," he answered.

"Did Willie Stokes ever tell you he committed any murder?" the lawyer asked.

"No," he replied.

After his testimony, Lee apologized to Stokes — who had been listening via teleconference from the State Correctional Institution in Chester.

"And I'd like to for the record, if I can, apologize to Mr. Stokes and the family for the problem I caused, sincerely," he said.

Stokes's lawyer advised him not to respond.

"Let the record reflect he's crying," Moore, the district court judge, pointed out. "I'm going to take his tears to indicate he's accepting the apology."

After the hearing, Moore recommended that Stokes's conviction be overturned, finding "reasonable probability" that Stokes would have been acquitted without Lee's testimony and concluded that the trial's verdict was "therefore unreliable."

"What happened here was an abomination," Diamondstein said. "For too many years, law enforcement in Philadelphia have treated Black and Brown people like they are expendable and this case is a stark reminder it has to stop," he added.

Stokes was released from the State Correctional Institution Monday afternoon.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Nigeria: 100 hostages rescued held for 2mo.
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/04/nearly-100-nigerian-hostages-rescued-after-two-months-of-captivity
GIST	Nearly 100 hostages, most of them women and children, have been rescued more than two months after they were abducted by armed groups in northwest Nigeria.

Among the 97 freed hostages were 19 babies and more than a dozen children, Ayuba Elkana, police chief in Zamfara state, said on Tuesday.

Mostly barefooted, weary and in worn-out clothes, the ex-captives trickled out of the buses that took them to Gusau, capital of Zamfara state. Women with malnourished-looking babies strapped to their backs trailed behind.

Coming a few days after 21 schoolchildren were freed by security forces, the rescue brought a sigh of relief in Nigeria where armed groups have killed thousands and kidnapped many residents and travellers in exchange for ransoms.

Police said the hostages were “rescued unconditionally” on Monday in joint security operations targeting the camps of armed groups that have been terrorising remote communities across the north-west and centre of Africa’s most populous country.

They had been abducted from their homes and along highways in remote communities in Zamfara and neighbouring Sokoto state.

The hostages had slept on the ground in abandoned forest reserves that serve as hideouts for the gunmen. The first batch of 68 “were in captivity for over three months and they include 33 male adults, seven male children, three female children and 25 women including pregnant/nursing mothers respectively,” Elkana said.

Another set of 29 victims were also rescued “unconditionally” in Kunchin Kalgo forest in the Tsafe local government area of Zamfara, police said.

It is not clear if ransoms were paid for the releases as is usually the case in many remote communities in Nigeria’s troubled north. Authorities have said the hostages’ freedom was the result of military operations including airstrikes.

The large bands of assailants are mostly young men from the Fulani ethnic group, who had traditionally worked as nomadic cattle herders and are caught up in a decades-long conflict with Hausa farming communities over access to water and grazing land.

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HEADLINE	01/05 Prosecutors move quickly on Jan 6 cases
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/us/politics/jan-6-capitol-riot-investigation.html
GIST	<p>By almost any measure, the criminal investigation of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol is a prosecutorial effort of unparalleled complexity and scope.</p> <p>For an entire year, federal agents in almost every state have been poring over mounting stacks of tipster reports, interviews with witnesses, public social media posts and private messages obtained by warrants. They have also collected nearly 14,000 hours of video — from media outlets, surveillance cameras and police-worn body cameras — enough raw footage that it would take a year and a half of around-the-clock viewing to get through it.</p> <p>While the Justice Department has called the inquiry one of the largest in its history, traditional law enforcement officials have not been acting alone. Working with information from online sleuths who style themselves as “Sedition Hunters,” the authorities have made more than 700 arrests — with little sign of slowing down.</p> <p>The government estimates that as many as 2,500 people who took part in the events of Jan. 6 could be charged with federal crimes. That includes more than 1,000 incidents that prosecutors believe could be assaults.</p>

As of this week, more than 225 people have been accused of attacking or interfering with the police that day. About 275 have been charged with what the government describes as the chief political crime on Jan. 6: obstructing Congress's duty to certify the 2020 presidential vote count. A little over 300 people have been charged with petty crimes alone, mostly trespassing and disorderly conduct.

But a big question hangs over the prosecutions: Will the Justice Department move beyond charging the rioters themselves?

So far, the department has provided no public indication of the degree to which it might be pursuing a case against former President Donald J. Trump and the circle of his allies who helped inspire the chaos with their baseless claims of election fraud. Attorney General Merrick B. Garland is scheduled to give a speech on Wednesday, one day before the anniversary of the attack on the Capitol, but is not expected to provide any signals about the direction of the department's investigation. A spokeswoman said he would not address any specific cases or individuals.

On Capitol Hill, the House select committee on Jan. 6 is interviewing witnesses and has issued subpoenas to a number of high-profile figures allied with Mr. Trump. And with Mr. Garland and the Justice Department remaining mum about their intentions, members of the committee have signaled a willingness to exert pressure on the department, saying they would consider making criminal referrals if their investigation turns up evidence that could support a prosecution against Mr. Trump or others.

Even the prosecutions of those who rioted at the Capitol have presented an array of moral and legal challenges that have bedeviled judges, prosecutors and defense lawyers.

Overworked courts have [tried to balance](#) the laborious exchange of discovery materials with speedy trial protections and to manage [the bleak conditions at Washington's local jails](#) where some defendants are being held without bail. They have also faced a fundamental, underlying tension: how to mete out justice on an individual level to hundreds of defendants who together helped form a violent mob.

Pleas and Sentences

With rare speed for a large-scale prosecution, more than 160 people — or slightly more than 20 percent of all who have been charged — have pleaded guilty at this point. Of those, not quite half have already been sentenced.

A few weeks ago, Robert Palmer, a Florida man who hurled a fire extinguisher at police officers, was [sentenced to more than five years in prison](#), the longest term handed down so far. In November, one of the most familiar figures in the attack — Jacob Chansley, the so-called QAnon Shaman, who breached the Senate floor in a horned helmet with a fur draped over his shoulders — [was sentenced to 41 months](#), a term he is appealing.

Beneath the headlines, however, there has been a steady stream of penalties for lower-profile defendants: bricklayers, grandmothers, college students, artists, church leaders and long-haul truckers who, by and large, have admitted to little more than illegally entering the Capitol.

Many, if not most, have avoided incarceration, sentenced to probation or stints of home confinement. Others have received only modest sentences, ranging from a few weeks to a few months.

In court, those accused of minor crimes have almost always expressed remorse, saying their behavior was foolish, embarrassing or out of character. Some have broken into tears or, in one case, physically collapsed. Others have vowed never to attend a political rally again.

Federal judges have taken slightly different positions on how to punish the defendants. Judge Trevor N. McFadden, appointed by Mr. Trump, often prefaces his sentences by calling the events that day “a national embarrassment” — though he has frequently declined to jail petty offenders. Judge Tanya S. Chutkan, an Obama appointee, has often given sentences higher than those requested by the government. Her go-to phrase: “There must be consequences.”

Judge Amit P. Mehta told John Lolos, a defendant clearly steeped in election fraud conspiracies, that not only had he been lied to, but those who had done the lying were not “paying the consequences.”

“Those who orchestrated Jan. 6 have in no meaningful sense been held accountable,” said Judge Mehta, another Obama appointee. “In a sense, Mr. Lolos, I think you are a pawn.”

Legal Challenges

From the start, prosecutors faced a unique legal problem: Never before had members of Congress been forced from the House and Senate floors while finalizing the transition of presidential power. What law should be used to charge this crime?

The government settled on an unusual obstruction law — the obstruction of an official proceeding before Congress. It brought the charge against scores of people believed to have disrupted the democratic process, often alongside more traditional counts of trespassing, vandalism and assault.

The obstruction law, which carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison, had a few advantages. First, it allowed the authorities to avoid deploying more politically fraught — and harder-to-prove — counts like sedition or insurrection.

It also permitted prosecutors to home in on the specific behavior of defendants and judge how much their actions contributed to the chaos that day. If someone went deep into the Capitol, say, or took some other action that helped to chase officials from their duties, chances are they have been charged with an obstruction count.

But many defense lawyers have claimed the law was wrongly used.

Passed in 2002 as part of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which sought to clamp down on corporate malfeasance, the measure was initially intended to prohibit things like shredding documents or tampering with witnesses in congressional inquiries. Defense lawyers have argued that prosecutors have stretched the law beyond its scope and used it to criminalize behavior that too closely resembles ordinary protest protected by the First Amendment.

In the past few weeks, however, five federal judges have ruled that the law is valid, and it now seems certain it will be permitted in scores of Jan. 6 prosecutions, including some that will soon go to trial.

Trials to Begin Soon

The earliest Capitol riot trials are scheduled to begin next month. When the proceedings start, jurors will most likely get a glimpse of how the government believes members of the mob worked together.

The first trial, set to begin on Feb. 24, will focus on Robert Gieswein of Colorado, a self-proclaimed militiaman charged with assaulting officers with a chemical spray.

In court papers, the government has indicated that it intends to show the jury videos of Mr. Gieswein’s assaults and to offer evidence that he told a reporter he was at the Capitol on Jan. 6 “to execute these fascists.” The papers also suggest that prosecutors believe Mr. Gieswein may try to argue he was acting in self-defense when he fought with the police — [a strategy that several other defendants have embraced](#).

A second trial, scheduled to start on Feb. 28, will feature another accused militiaman, Guy Reffitt, a former oil industry employee who the government has said is a member of the Texas Three Percenters radical gun rights movement.

At Mr. Reffitt’s trial, prosecutors plan to tell the jury that he brought an AR-15 rifle and a semiautomatic handgun to Washington, and was wearing a special holster designed for concealed weapons. The government has also said it will call a Secret Service agent who will testify that he and other agents protecting Vice President Mike Pence that day were adversely affected by the chaos and violence.

How High Do the Prosecutions Go?

At least so far, prosecutors appear to be building their cases from the bottom up, starting with those they can accuse of definable crimes and looking for potential links to others.

That said, one possible avenue for moving up the food chain is the case of Owen Shroyer, the right-hand man of the far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. Mr. Shroyer marched on the Capitol with Mr. Jones and Ali Alexander, the Stop the Steal organizer, on Jan. 6 and was arrested months later on disorderly conduct charges.

Neither Mr. Jones nor Mr. Alexander has been charged. But both men had connections to the Trump White House. [Mr. Jones](#) helped organize the [rally at the Ellipse](#) near the White House before the riot and has said that White House officials told him that he was to lead a march to the Capitol, where Mr. Trump would speak, according to the House committee investigating Jan. 6, which [issued a subpoena to him](#) in November.

It remains unclear how two other investigations into lawyers who have worked with Mr. Trump — Sidney Powell and Rudolph W. Giuliani — might also intersect with the inquiry into the riot. While neither of those investigations, which appear to be focused on [financial improprieties](#) and [federal lobbying laws](#), are directly connected to the Capitol attack, both Ms. Powell and Mr. Giuliani helped Mr. Trump spread lies about the election before Jan. 6.

Perhaps the best source for potential charges against prominent political defendants is the House select committee. While the panel's stated goal was to put together an authoritative record of the attack and recommend ways to ensure it never happened again, investigators [have started to consider making criminal referrals](#) to the Justice Department.

Countering the Disinformation

Even as prosecutors have demonstrated with vivid evidence the pro-Trump nature of the mob and the extent of the violence, Mr. Trump and his allies have continued seeking to rewrite the history of the Capitol attack through a nearly yearlong disinformation campaign. "The real insurrection happened on Nov. 3, the Presidential Election, not on Jan. 6 — which was a day of protesting the Fake Election results," Mr. Trump declared in November.

At different moments, conservative commentators and politicians have dismissed those who took part in the assault on the Capitol as mere tourists and have [lionized them as martyrs and political prisoners](#). They have alternately blamed undercover F.B.I. agents and leftists in disguise for the storming of the building.

One group of people has seen through these baseless claims: a subset of the defendants who have been prosecuted for attacking the Capitol. Several have stood up in court and admitted they felt betrayed by Mr. Trump and were deluded by his efforts to portray the election as rigged.

At his sentencing hearing, for example, Mr. Palmer said that he had recently recognized that the former president and those around him were "spitting out the false narrative about a stolen election and how it was 'our duty' to stand up to tyranny."

Eventually, he said, he came to understand that "they were the tyrannical ones, desperate to hold on to power at any cost."

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HEADLINE	01/04 South Africa parliament fire mystery
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/world/africa/southafrica-parliament-fire-suspect.html
GIST	CAPE TOWN — As a fire that gutted the country's Parliament buildings was finally extinguished on Tuesday and a bedraggled suspect appeared in court, South Africans were struggling to understand whether the blaze was an act of sabotage, negligence or a simple crime of opportunity.

A jobless man, hard on his luck, has emerged as the central suspect. Zandile Christmas Mafe, 49, who liked to talk politics with friends, was charged on Tuesday with arson, theft, housebreaking and possession of explosives.

Police said they spotted and arrested Mr. Mafe at the Parliament complex in Cape Town shortly after the fire was reported on Sunday. Prosecutors said he was caught with stolen laptops, documents and crockery. He was also charged with breaking state security laws, because the Parliament buildings are a site of national strategic importance.

The sudden destruction of historic buildings that housed the National Assembly, and the offices of lawmakers, the governing African National Congress party and several opposition parties, has set off widespread confusion and speculation in a politically divided country. South Africa is still on edge after a wave of rioting last July, which resulted in the deaths of more than 300 people.

On short notice, members of Parliament held a virtual meeting for more than three and a half hours on Tuesday, where lawmakers echoed concerns raised by the public: Were maintenance and safety protocols in the buildings too lax? Did the sprinklers fail? Why has the Parliament's Protection Services been left without a permanent head since 2015?

And have police and prosecutors found the actual culprit?

"Why would a 'vagrant' wakeup and burndown parliament?" tweeted Fikile Mbalula, the minister of transport and a senior member of the A.N.C. The speaker of Parliament, Nosiviwe Mapisa Nqakula, said she believed the fire was no accident.

Mr. Mafe appeared only briefly in a packed magistrates' court, not far from the gutted parliamentary complex in the city center, disheveled in a faded long-sleeved gray shirt with denim shorts and dirty sneakers.

Standing behind a thick plastic screen, in place for pandemic regulations, he lowered his mask, allowing reporters to see his face.

He did not enter a plea, although his lawyer, Luvuyo Godla, said he plans to plead not guilty. He remains in custody, and prosecutors have opposed bail, citing the severity of the charges.

Mr. Godla said his client denied setting the fire or carrying an explosive device, and accused the government of scapegoating a poor man to find a suspect quickly and distract from its own failure to protect its buildings.

"What interest would that poor man have in Parliament?" Mr. Godla said, speaking to reporters on the steps of the court.

Prosecutors, however, say that they are certain they have the right man.

"He's got a case to answer for," Eric Ntabazalila, a spokesman for the National Prosecuting Authority, said in a telephone interview. "Based on the evidence, we went to court."

He said that more charges were likely to be filed by the next court appearance. That is scheduled for Jan. 11, to allow investigators to access the site, which remains dangerous.

Inside the small, corrugated iron shack where Mr. Mafe lives in the township of Khayelitsha, 20 miles southeast of Cape Town's city center, neighbors said the television, satellite dish and refrigerator he owned had raised suspicion.

"He had things that people in the area who work don't have," said Patrick Nkwela. "How do you explain that?"

Several neighbors said Mr. Mafe had only moved into the area in August of 2021. He lived alone and seemed to know no one. He could also always afford alcohol, they said, which he drank alone.

He did not work but never missed his rent, said Wendy Luhabe, his next-door neighbor.

In Langa, a township in Cape Town where Mr. Mafe had lived for five years before moving to Khayelitsha, neighbors had a different impression of him and were surprised that he was accused of having anything to do with the Parliament fire.

They remember Mr. Mafe as respectful and timid. They called him by his middle name, Christmas, or just Chris. He liked to talk about current affairs and decried corruption, but never in a way that felt threatening. A friend, Doreen Lekoma, said he'd worked for a bread factory but had lost that job earlier in 2021.

When she bumped into him in July, she said, he looked disheveled, and was carrying an ironing board and other belongings. She said she had seen him again on Dec. 26, and he had looked hungry and confused, so she gave him a meal.

His former girlfriend, Mbinde Andoni, said she last saw him on Christmas Day. The next time she saw him was in news footage from court, and she was shocked to see he was wearing the same gray shirt and denim shorts.

"He was clearly sleeping on streets. How would he know how to get into Parliament, what important areas and documents to burn? It doesn't add up," said Ms. Andoni.

As South Africans watched smoke billow from the entrance of the National Assembly, its chambers gutted and roof collapsed, the sense of unease from the July unrest returned.

"The trust deficit between South African citizens and the government is just yawning at this point," said Ziyanda Stuurman, an independent security analyst and a former researcher at Parliament.

The state has yet to provide a "satisfactory answer" about the July unrest, and yet again, politicians are seen to be deflecting questions about security, instead of winning public confidence, she added.

Opposition politicians raised questions about why the sprinkler system reportedly kicked in only after firefighters had arrived on the scene. A parliamentarian belonging to a faction aligned with the former president, Jacob Zuma, demanded to see security camera evidence of the suspect entering Parliament, and circulated an image said to be Mr. Mafe, in the same clothes he wore in court, asleep on a Cape Town sidewalk.

Others questioned the timing of the fire — just days before the president and Parliament were to receive the first part of a report of a large-scale commission looking into corruption under the government of Mr. Zuma, the former president. On Tuesday, President Cyril Ramaphosa, Mr. Zuma's former deputy and now rival, received the first part of the report and made it public.

The fire decimated the interior of a complex made up of three conjoined buildings built between the 1880s and expanded more than a century later, spanning the country's transition from colony to apartheid regime to constitutional democracy.

More than 60 firefighters battled the blaze, supported by crew from South Africa's Air Force. At one point, the wind was so strong that firefighters pulled what one official called "death-defying Spider-Man moves," climbing up the side of the building to prevent the fire from sweeping into Tuynhuys, the official office of the president.

HEADLINE	01/04 NY punished prisoners on faulty drug tests
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/nyregion/ny-prisons-faulty-drug-tests.html
GIST	<p>New York's prison system unjustly penalized more than 1,600 incarcerated people based on faulty drug tests, putting them in solitary confinement, delaying their parole hearings and denying them family visits, the New York State inspector general said in a damning report released on Tuesday.</p> <p>The arbitrary penalties were meted out across the state over an eight-month period in 2019, while the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision relied on improperly administered drug tests made by the company Microgenics, the report found. The tests led to "rampant false positive" results for buprenorphine, an opioid used to treat addiction, as well as synthetic cannabinoids.</p> <p>"This stands as a heartbreaking example of how the absence of transparency can undermine due process and basic human rights," Lucy Lang, the inspector general, said at a news conference on Tuesday.</p> <p>The department started using the tests in January 2019, the report found. The manufacturer's directions specified that a positive result should be confirmed with a second, more sensitive test, but officials neglected to do so as a matter of policy. Instead, they simply carried out the same test a second time to confirm the results.</p> <p>The rate of positive tests immediately spiked, but the department failed to address widespread concerns among prisoners, their families and advocates that many of the results were false positives, the report found.</p> <p>The report cited several examples of the grave consequences the tests had for prisoners. One woman at Albion Correctional Facility, near Rochester, N.Y., who had never tested positive for drug use during her two years in jail, suddenly tested positive for synthetic cannabinoids.</p> <p>As punishment, she was confined to her cell for 40 days and placed in solitary confinement for 45 days. She lost her prison job and privileges like recreation time, receipt of packages and phone use for months. She was also denied visits with her three children.</p> <p>The report also accused Microgenics representatives of presenting false or misleading information to prison officials.</p> <p>A review of internal company documents revealed that even ingesting over-the-counter antacids and the sweetener Stevia could potentially lead to false positives, but the company failed to disclose those possibilities, the report said.</p> <p>The report faulted department officials for deciding to forgo the second test and found that a sales representative from Microgenics had exerted undue influence over the process.</p> <p>It also found that the contract with the company most likely violated procurement guidelines and that the department "did not perform due diligence when contracting with Microgenics for its drug testing systems, failing to understand that such tests were merely preliminary screening tests."</p> <p>During the eight-month period, more than 1,600 prisoners were punished over drug tests statewide, including 140 who were subjected to solitary confinement, leading to complaints from inmates across the state, Ms. Lang said.</p> <p>Prisoners' Legal Services of New York, an advocacy group, brought the concerns of four incarcerated people who said they had been disciplined based on false positives to the department in June 2019. Later that summer, the department sent six positive test samples from other prisoners to another company for retesting, and five came back negative.</p> <p>The department then brought its findings to the office of the inspector general. It later moved to expunge more than 2,500 disciplinary records that were based on the faulty drug tests.</p>

Karen L. Murtagh, the executive director of Prisoners' Legal Services of New York, said the impact of the penalties was difficult to overstate.

"The psychological and physical damage caused by solitary confinement, the loss of family visitation, the lack of proper programming, lost work-release and educational opportunities, all of which help combat recidivism, adds to the ledger for which we as a society need to take account," she said.

Bianca Tylek, executive director of Worth Rises, an advocacy group that seeks to dismantle the prison industry, said the report illustrated the problems inherent in allowing private companies to profit from incarceration. She called for further review of prison contracts.

In a statement on Tuesday, the department noted that its staff had cooperated with the inspector general's investigation and adopted all its recommendations, which included ending solitary confinement in response to drug tests and improving drug-test training and data collection.

Microgenics is a subsidiary of Thermo Fisher Scientific, a Massachusetts-based company. In a statement on Tuesday, Ron O'Brien, a spokesman for the company, said the instructions clearly state that the drug tests are only preliminary and that a more specific, alternative chemical method must be used to obtain a confirmed result.

"We have complete confidence in our product and, when it is used as directed, have no reason to believe there is any issue with its accuracy," Mr. O'Brien said.

He added that the company had conducted its own investigation and did not believe that any Microgenics representatives provided "any intentionally false or misleading testimony" at disciplinary hearings, as alleged in the report.

The drug tests have spurred several lawsuits, including a federal class-action suit filed by Prisoners' Legal Services and the law firm Emery Celli Brinckerhoff Abady Ward & Maazel in 2019. The following year, Letitia James, the New York attorney general, filed suit on behalf of the Department of Corrections against Microgenics in Albany, alleging breach of contract. The lawsuit is pending.

The department now uses a preliminary drug screening test known as the Premier Biotech Bio-Cup, and positive results are confirmed using a second method.

Ms. Lang, who was appointed inspector general in the fall, said that more than half the complaints her office receives involve the prison system.

"We are directing resources toward addressing those complaints as proactively as possible," she said.

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HEADLINE	01/04 Arrest: Colombian in Haiti president killing
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/world/americas/suspect-detained-haiti-assassination.html
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY — The United States has arrested a Colombian accused of participating in the murder of President Jovenel Moïse of Haiti — the first suspect to face U.S. prosecution in relation to the crime.</p> <p>Mario Palacios was detained by U.S. authorities at an airport in Panama on Monday, and flown from there to Miami. He will appear before a federal judge on Tuesday to face as yet unspecified charges, according to a Justice Department spokesperson.</p> <p>His arrest was first reported by The Miami Herald.</p> <p>Mr. Palacios, 43, was among two dozen retired members of Colombian military special forces who traveled to Haiti between May and June as private security contractors hired by a Miami-based security firm called CTU Security, according to interviews with their families and Haitian police. Once in</p>

	<p>Haiti, their mission appears to have gradually changed from providing protection to local dignitaries to storming the presidential residence in an operation that resulted in Mr. Moïse's death last July, according to Haitian police and Colombian intelligence.</p> <p>Mr. Moïse was gunned down in his bedroom by assassins who spoke Spanish, according to his wife, Martine Moïse, who was injured in the attack. However, the exact identity of the killers, the details of Mr. Moïse's death and the ultimate mastermind of the plot remain unknown.</p> <p>Mr. Palacios could help shed light on some of those questions. He was among the five Colombian ex-soldiers who formed part of the "Delta Team," which entered his residence during the attack, according to the preliminary investigation report by the Haitian police.</p> <p>After the assault he was the only one of his companions to escape Haitian authorities. He eventually fled to Jamaica, where he was detained. The authorities there decided to return him to Colombia, but U.S. agents intervened Monday on a stopover in Panama.</p> <p>Three Colombian soldiers said to have taken part in the operation against Mr. Moïse were killed by the Haitian police, and the remaining 18 were captured and jailed in the capital, Port-au-Prince. They have yet to be formally charged.</p> <p>Some of the detained soldiers have confessed to participating in the murder in their initial depositions, according to the police reports. Since then, however, they have retracted their confessions, claiming that they were obtained under torture and that they are being framed for a crime they did not commit.</p> <p>"I don't know who killed him. I'm telling you that from my heart, I swear on my family, my sons," Mr. Palacios told the Colombian magazine Semana while in hiding in Port-au-Prince in August. He said that when he arrived in Mr. Moïse's bedroom, the president was already dead.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Spain: stolen, unauthorized Covid test kits
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/04/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#the-spanish-police-investigate-hundreds-of-thousands-of-stolen-or-unauthorized-covid-tests
GIST	<p>The police in Spain are investigating major cases of theft or the illegal trafficking of Covid test kits amid a serious shortage of the tests.</p> <p>The national police released a video showing the seizure of 300,000 unauthorized antigen tests from a warehouse on Dec. 29 in the municipality of Fuenlabrada on the outskirts of Madrid, the capital.</p> <p>And near Barcelona, 208,000 antigen tests were stolen from a warehouse on New Year's Eve.</p> <p>The criminal activity comes at a time when the shortage of test kits has prompted panic buying and long lines outside pharmacies and health care centers.</p> <p>Before Christmas, Spain's health minister, Carolina Darias, warned that the shortage of tests had become a "maximum worry" amid the rapid spread of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>She said the spread of the variant had increased demand for tests by more than 1,000 percent in two weeks. On Monday, Spain reported about 35,000 new daily cases. The 14-day average case rate has climbed to almost 2,300 cases per 100,000 inhabitants.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/04 Illinois cop disarmed; killed by own gun
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/prosecutor-illinois-cop-disarmed-killed-gun-82072862
GIST	KANKAKEE, Ill. -- A police officer who was killed at a northern Illinois hotel pleaded for her life before a man allegedly shot her with her own gun after she was disarmed during a struggle, a prosecutor said.

Bradley police Sgt. Marlene Rittmanic and her partner, Officer Tyler Bailey, were shot on Dec. 29 while investigating a noise complaint regarding dogs barking in a parked car outside a Comfort Inn. Bailey remained hospitalized Monday and is “fighting for his life,” Kankakee County State’s Attorney Jim Rowe said during a bond hearing for Xandria Harris.

Rowe said during Monday's hearing that Harris' co-defendant, 25-year-old Darius Sullivan, had his own gun and used it to shoot Bailey in the head after the officers knocked on the pair's hotel room door, the Chicago Sun-Times reported. Rowe said Sullivan then allegedly shot at Rittmanic as she tried to run away before he chased her down a hallway and pinned her against a door. As Sullivan and Rittmanic scuffled, he said Sullivan called out to Harris and she helped him disarm Rittmanic.

Rowe said the encounter was captured on Rittmanic’s body camera.

He said Sullivan and Harris then allegedly stood over Rittmanic pointing guns at her as she lay on the floor, already shot once.

“Sgt. Rittmanic was pleading with them to, ‘Just leave, you don’t have to do this, please just go, please don’t, please don’t,’” Rowe said. “She was desperately pleading for her life.”

While Harris held Sullivan’s gun, Sullivan allegedly fired two shots from what prosecutors believe to be Rittmanic’s gun, striking the sergeant in the neck area, Rowe said.

Sullivan and Harris are charged with fatally shooting Rittmanic, 49, and critically wounding Bailey, 27. Sullivan, who was arrested in Indiana, is fighting extradition to Illinois.

Rowe said his office will seek life sentences on the state charges. He has asked the Justice Department to review the case with the intention of pursuing federal death penalty charges. Illinois is not a death penalty state.

Rowe said in a news release that there is “recent precedent” for pursuing the federal death penalty for the murder of a law enforcement officer and also precedent for pursuing it in “non-death penalty states.”

A message seeking additional comment was left for Rowe on Tuesday by The Associated Press.

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